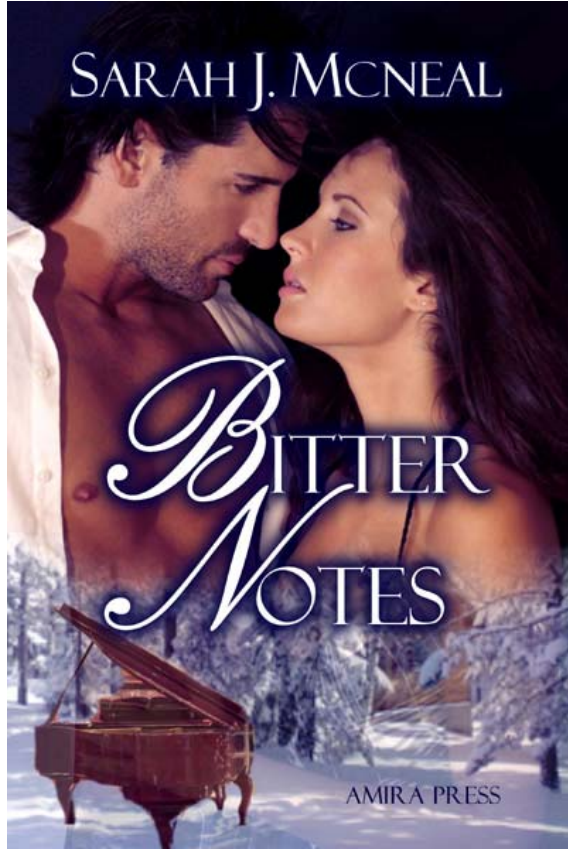


SARAH J. MCNEAL

*BITTER
NOTES*

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Bitter Notes

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Dedication

Bitter Notes is dedicated to musicians, vocalists, and all of the people on Earth who love music. And to Dr. Alin Vesa, who regaled me with stories of Romania and of his father, who brought his family to America with very little wealth but made a good life for them and ensured that his children had the best education possible. Although I've never met him, I admire his grit.

Acknowledgments

Erin Cramer, my editor, whose dedication and professionalism helped me present the best story I could write.

Chapter One

Absorbed in her thoughts about Mark, the man who jilted her on what was to be her wedding day two years ago, she almost drove past the baby grand piano sitting out in the front yard of a little cottage. She had seen it every day for the last week. It was a beautiful thing made of honey-colored oak with ornately carved legs. It seemed to have known a better life with its polished surface reflecting the gray sky above. The yellow, red, and orange fall foliage surrounding it made it seem even more out of place. The piano was an odd presence there on the leaf-covered lawn of the little cottage house along the side of the quiet street. It seemed to beckon to her.

Ella noticed with dismay that the sky warned of a storm coming in. What if the piano remained out in the elements? In the rain or snow? There was no For Sale sign. The first few days she had seen it, Ella thought that the people in the cottage must be moving and that soon it would be loaded on a truck and taken to sit in a beautiful room where the sun would gleam through the window and paint sunlight on its surface.

She could imagine someone sitting at it playing something haunting and magnificent. When that didn't happen and the piano remained out in the elements, she thought that perhaps they were trying to move the piano inside but couldn't figure out how to get it through the doorway without marring its magnificent finish. Now it seemed that was not the case either. Surely, by now, they would have discovered a way to house it, have attempted to remove a door or window to get it into the house.

It sat there without even so much as a tarp to protect it from the damaging winds and rain predicted for later that afternoon. It looked pitiful and dejected, much the same as Ella felt. It just wasn't right to allow something so wonderful, so beautiful, to fall into destruction. It needed someone to care for it, to cherish it and listen to it. It should be given the chance to fulfill its purpose of filling the world with its lovely sound.

Before Ella considered what she was about to do, she slammed on the brakes, squealing her tires and skidding to a halt in the driveway of a stranger's house. Filled with righteous indignation and fury, she pressed vigorously on the doorbell.

When an elderly man finally answered the door, Ella said, more harshly than she intended, "What's wrong with you? Why have you allowed this beautiful piano to sit out here in the rain to rot?"

"Mind your own business," the man grumbled and started to close the door.

Ella held her hand against the door even more determined now to get some answers and save the instrument and its artistic beauty. "I don't have a clue why you would want to willingly destroy something so magnificent, but I demand that you allow me to buy it from you. I'm willing to pay for its full value even though you must think it has no value since you set it out here like so much garbage." In her mind, she was calculating just how long it would take to replace the money in her 401(k).

"No, lady, I'm not selling the damn thing. I don't want any money for it. All I want is to watch it die." He slammed the door in her face before she could ask another question or respond to his angry words.

Not ready to accept that as an answer, Ella leaned on the doorbell until the man returned and opened the door.

"I told you, lady, it's not for sale." His face was red, livid with anger and determination, but Ella had to have answers. She just couldn't give up.

"Just tell me why. Why would you let something so beautiful that could bring such pleasure to other people rot in the weather here in your yard?" The wind was picking up, and Ella had to pull her coat close around her to keep from shivering.

"Since you'll hound me to death if I don't tell you, I'll give you the reason." He folded his arms

across his chest. His eyes took on a dark gleam. "It was my wife's. She played it every day, and I loved to hear it. The music was like joy filling the house." He stumbled to a stop and grew silent.

Quietly, Ella asked, "Did she die?"

The anger was back in his face, flushing his cheeks and furrowing his brow. "Hell, no. I wish she had. At least she would have died loving me." He swallowed hard. "She ran off with another man. Half her age, he was. Thirty years we lived together. I thought we were happy." A muscle in his jaw ticked. "She betrayed me, made me feel like a good-for-nothing fool."

The rain came without warning. It came down fast and hard, soaking Ella until she felt saturated and cold. She could not help glancing at the piano as the water danced on its surface. "I'm sorry your wife left you. I know it must have hurt. The piano had nothing to do with it. Won't you reconsider? I'll pay you whatever you think it's worth."

The fury inside him seemed to burn through his eyes when he glanced at the piano and then at Ella. "For the last time, it's not for sale. I'm going to let it stay out here until it rots into little pieces, and then I'm going to enjoy scraping it up and putting it out for the garbage collector. Now get off my property, and don't come back." This time he slammed the door so hard the glass shook. Ella thought for a moment it might break.

She'd never seen anyone so enraged, and it was frightening. Her hands shook, and her knees went weak. Ella ran to her car trying to get out of the rain holding her purse over her head. Once sheltered inside her car, she dug in her purse and grabbed her cell phone. The number to Nickoli Vesa's music shop came automatically to her. Her heart lifted when she heard his voice and his broken English on the other end. It felt as though sunshine had evaporated the darkness.

"Is Vesa's Music Shop. May I help you?"

"It's me, Nick. I have a big favor to ask of you." Ella pulled down the visor and looked at herself in the mirror. Her plain brown hair was soaked with rain and plastered to her head. There was no way she could fix her wet hair before she got to school. Her plain appearance looked even worse than usual as she stared at herself in the mirror.

"Whatever I can do to help you, this I do," he replied, his voice even softer now.

She started up the engine and reluctantly pulled out of the driveway and moved down the street, away from the neglected piano. "There's a beautiful baby grand piano sitting out in this horrible man's yard. He hates it because it was his wife's, and is determined to allow it to disintegrate from the elements." She took a breath to control the anger that was raging inside her. Was the anger really only about this piano? In her heart, she wondered if she would be so determined to save the piano if it had not been so beautiful. She was ashamed of the answer. "He won't give it to me. He shouted at me, and then he shut the door in my face. So, I was wondering if you could come and talk to him. Maybe you can convince him to sell it. Maybe you could—"

"Not to worry yourself," Nickoli interrupted her as if knowing exactly what she needed from him. "Give me his address, and I will talk to him. If I can convince him to sell it, I will get my friends to help me, and I bring it to the shop where I can look at the damage."

"I hate to put you to such trouble. I just can't bear to see it out there with the rain falling, causing it to go into ruin like that."

"Is for you. No trouble to me, but is gladness to help." His voice sounded warm, like a soft coat against the chill.

"I'll drop by this afternoon when I'm finished with my music students. Would you like me to pick you up something for supper? It's the least I can do to repay you." She ran her fingers through her wet hair trying to arrange it into something presentable before she pulled into the school parking lot.

"Not so necessary to repay. But I want to have supper with you, and we visit then, yes?" He laughed softly, a comforting sound that dispelled the gloom.

Ella laughed, feeling that a little cloud had moved away from her heart. “Thank you, Nick, thank you so much. If anyone can convince him to sell it, it would be you, only you. You are such a dear friend.”

“Friend,” he repeated, his voice flat. “Yes, friend, of course.”

“I’ll see you around six o’clock tonight then,” said Ella, feeling that his mood had changed and didn’t understand what had caused it. Had she hurt his feelings in some way?

Chapter Two

The day passed quickly. Before she realized it, it was time to pick up some supper and go to Nickoli Vesa's shop to see if he had been able to convince that awful man to sell the piano. She tied her hair back in a ponytail and changed into a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. She thought about putting on some makeup but simply washed her face instead. There was no need to put on airs for her friend. She was comfortable to be herself around him.

Ella stopped at the Boston Market and picked up some meatloaf, creamed potatoes, steamed asparagus, freshly baked rolls, and, for dessert, a couple slices of creamy chocolate cheesecake. Nickoli met her at the door when she arrived. He helped her with her bags and set them on one of the many piano benches close to him. The room was full of pianos in every state of repair. The shop smelled of fine wood and varnish.

"Come," he said, guiding her with his hand on the small of her back into another room of pianos of every make and model. He made her comfortable in a chair by his workbench, then took a seat on a piano bench, and pulled it up close to her.

His dark eyes told her before he spoke that he had been unsuccessful in obtaining the piano. He shook his head, setting his silky black hair into motion. "He is a sad and bitter man. His wife hurt him deeply. You understand this, yes?" His warm hands engulfed hers. "We talked a long time. I had tea with him. Is not a bad man, just sad and wounded. Some wounds never heal."

She withdrew her hands from his warm grasp. Yeah, she knew where this was going. Nickoli was going to give her the same old sorry lecture about letting go of the past, about leaving what happened on what would have been her wedding day behind her. Elle bristled, wrapping her arms around herself as if to ward off his words. "It's easy for you to talk about letting go of the past, Nick, because you've never been in love, never had to suffer the kind of loss I have."

He straightened his back. His expression indicated his astonishment at her words. She regretted them the minute she spoke them.

"I have known great love, Ella. My wife and child died in Romania. I had to leave. I came to America with my father, and we started our lives over again here with this shop." He smiled thinly. "But you know this. I told you this long ago." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You cannot get Mark back any more than you can save this piano."

"It's not the same, Nick, and you know it. Your wife loved you. She died loving you. Mark fell in love with someone else, and he humiliated me on what should have been the happiest day of my life." She stood and turned her back to Nickoli, unable to look into those black-coffee eyes and see his disappointment in her. She bit back the tears that came every time she remembered that day. Her chest ached with the piercing pain of remembrance.

She felt the warmth of his presence close behind her. He put his arms around her, pulling her back close to his chest. His voice was low and soothing when he spoke. "Until you let go of Mark, your heart is closed to anyone else."

He didn't get it. How was she supposed to get over the pain of Mark's rejection in front of all those people? She would never find love again because she never had it in the first place. Ella pulled out of the warm circle of his arms and turned to face him. "You know nothing of how it feels to be rejected, to love someone, to yearn for them to love you back."

His arms dropped to his sides, his face was as unreadable as a stone, and his words chipped at her heart. "Of course, only you would know the bitterness of unrequited love, Ella." His tone was sullen and cold. If words could have physical force, then Nickoli's words were like a slap to her face.

"Maybe I should go. I don't want to fight with you, Nick." She reached for her purse, but Nick stopped her and took her hand.

"I am sorry. I did not wish to hurt you." He walked into the next room, taking her with him,

where all the pianos sat. He let go of her hand and picked up the bags of food. Then he turned back to her. "Come let us enjoy the meal you brought and talk of other things. You will feel better soon."

Ella followed Nickoli to the door and looked up into his eyes. "I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't be so touchy. You're my dearest friend. I don't want us to fight."

His dark eyes glowed with warmth as a lock of black hair fell over his brow. Ella resisted the urge to lift the silky strands with her fingers.

"Tomorrow I will try again to save her," he said.

She smiled back at him feeling confident now. Everything was going to be all right. The piano would be played again as it was intended. If anyone could convince the man to let go of it, it would be Nick. Her stomach growled with hunger, and she laughed. "Come on, let's go back to your place and chow down on this good food."

He looked confused a moment. Ella thought he was probably trying to decipher the word *chow*. "Ah, yes," he said with comprehension. "I made salad, and I have wine for you. We eat now."

They left the workshop and walked across the lawn to Nickoli's house, an old Victorian with a wraparound porch that had inviting rocking chairs and a porch swing. They entered the warmth of the cozy house through the heavy oak door with beveled glass. Nickoli had done most of the repairs himself. Ella thought what a wonderful job he had done of restoring it to its former beauty.

He led her into the dining alcove that was lined with tall windows and French doors that led out onto the porch at the back. Across the lawn, Ella could see the huge pond with its water lilies and black swans. Nickoli had prepared the table with an antique tablecloth embroidered with tiny forget-me-nots and used his fine china that he reserved for special occasions. Their places were already set, one at the end of the table and the other next to it on the side. It seemed comfortable and sweet.

Ella saw that Nickoli had gone to some trouble to make the elegant table setting. "I just picked up some ordinary food at the market. I didn't know you expected something grand. It's just meatloaf and mashed potatoes."

"Is my favorite." His smile warmed her with its radiance. "The food is perfect. I set table for you, to honor your visit." That he treated her as if she were special made Ella's heart flood with joy. Nickoli divided the hot meal between the two plates, arranging it in such a way that it seemed distinctive and welcoming. He opened the bottle of wine, poured it into the stemmed glasses, and set one at each place. "Now you sit with me, and we eat and enjoy."

They laughed and talked with ease for what seemed to Ella only a short while but, in fact, hours had passed. The sun had set, and the evening had grown chilly.

"Come, let us watch the stars from the swing." Nickoli placed his jacket around her shoulders and picked up a wool throw from the back of the couch.

She joined him on the swing that hung from the porch. He sat close to her, pulled her into the comfortable warmth of his side, and placed the warm throw over their laps. Gently, he rocked them as they spoke softly and watched the stars dotting the navy blue night sky. The gentle squeaking of the swing moving and the tree frogs crying in unison lulled them with their soothing sounds. The rain had stopped earlier in the day, allowing the pale light of the moon to shine on the landscape around them. Its glow reflected on the surface of the pond, creating an ethereal scene. The swans glided through the golden tinted waters, silently adding to the beauty of the scene. Ella nestled into the comfort of Nickoli's embrace and laid her head on his shoulder. Everything seemed at peace in a quiet world there in his embrace. He was the best friend she had ever had.

She asked Nickoli to tell her once again the story of how he and his father left Romania seeking freedom and hope in the United States. In Romania, life was hard, and even though their music shop had brought in a profit, it was barely enough to sustain the family.

"Even so, we became accustomed to not having riches. It was enough for us."

As if their situation couldn't get any worse, Nickoli lost his mother to pneumonia, and his young

wife had died bleeding to death when she miscarried their baby, all this tragedy within two years.

His eyes grew dark with sadness. “Marilena and I were too young. We were both sixteen when we married. She should have been going to parties and dancing, not having a baby. Youth is filled with fire and passion—not patience or common sense.” Nickoli glanced at her.

With only the two of them left, the memories haunted Nickoli and his father, and life seemed to be filled with darkness and despair. He and his father, Alin Vesa, took what little they could and made their way to America with the hope that they could escape the memories and begin again in a new land where freedom and happiness might be found. His father started the music shop within a few years after their arrival in America. Nickoli was twenty-one years old when they started their instrument repair business. He had learned all that he could from his father back in Romania, and now, once again, he could use his skills to build and repair beautiful pianos. Between them, they healed the wounds, the ones of the spirit and the heart, not of the flesh. They found the strength to go on with their lives in the face of what they had lost.

Nickoli told Ella once again how he almost succumbed to the pain of his loss when his father died. “Instead, I choose this life. I am my father’s legacy. What I do with my life now is what would make him proud of his son. Like my father, I give back the life to these broken pianos. They sing sweet again.”

With her head comfortably resting on his shoulder, Ella felt like one of his pianos. He helped her feel like her life was coming back to her. “It’s a beautiful story. I could listen to it over and over again.”

“It gives me joy to tell it to you.” He said it quietly and rested his cheek on the crown of her head.

The stars sparkled in the sky as they sat there on the swing gently rocking in a slow rhythm, not needing to speak further. It was with great reluctance that Ella declared the hour had grown late and she had to leave.

Nickoli walked her to her car and opened the door for her. She got in and put on her seat belt. He leaned down toward her before he closed her door, and, for one intriguing moment, she thought he was going to kiss her. Why did her heart race at such a thought? He kissed the top of her head instead.

“You get rest and teach children good music tomorrow.” He lifted his head and looked toward his shop. “I will talk to the man again about the piano. Maybe we see if she sings sweet song again.”

“Thank you, Nick, thank you for trying so hard for my sake.”

Ella pulled out of the gravel driveway feeling just a tiny bit disappointed that Nickoli hadn’t really kissed her. How ridiculous. He was her friend, after all.

Chapter Three

The weather worsened over the next two weeks as the leaves quickly dropped and winter set in with the first snow.

Nickoli's attempts to convince the owner of the abandoned piano to allow him to purchase and remove the instrument had failed. He and Ella drove by one day just as the newly fallen snow had quieted the world with its pristine cover. There it sat in all its glory, still beautiful under its crisp white blanket.

Unable to resist its pull on her heart, Ella asked Nickoli to stop. He pulled the SUV to the side of the road, got out, went around to the passenger side, and opened the door for Ella. They trudged through the snow to stand before the piano. Ella's heart ached for the deteriorating instrument. The piano seemed lonely, abandoned, and forgotten. She watched in silent mourning as Nickoli brushed the snow from the keys. He surprised her when he began to play a familiar tune, "The Word" by the Beatles. Of all the songs he could have chosen, Ella felt this song was perfect for the dying piano and sang as Nickoli played.

"Say the word and you'll be free,
Say the word and be like me,
Say the word I'm thinking of,
Have you heard the word is love?
It's so fine, it's sunshine,
It's the word love."

Ella wondered if the old man heard what Nickoli was playing. Was he still angry? Amazingly, the owner did not come out and chase them away. Perhaps he had gone to spend the Thanksgiving holidays with his family. It was hard to imagine a man as cold as him having a loving family. Maybe he was sick in the hospital. She almost felt sorry for thinking such bad things about him when she thought he might be ill. The feeling passed quickly when she listened to Nickoli play what might be the last music that would ever come from the piano.

The music spilled from the heart of the baby grand and poured its sorrow on Ella until she didn't think she could bear the terrible loneliness of its mournful sound another moment. Her eyes welled with tears. Her own deep, unrelenting sadness came to the surface and ate at her heart. The piano stood in dignified repose like a stalwart soldier waiting for orders, all the while knowing there would be no further orders, no further requests for its talents. Ella felt the love of her life had done the same to her, and she, like the piano, must press on with whatever dignity she had left. How long would the piano suffer like this? How long would she?

When Nickoli completed the song and the notes died under the falling snow, he returned to Ella and took her in his arms as if guessing how sad the piano made her feel. He whispered close to her ear, "She still has hope. She still sings." He helped her back to the car and closed the door.

In the few moments that she was alone in the quiet of the car staring out at the piano, Ella could no longer hold back the flood of tears that gathered in her core and made her chest hurt with the pressure of the pent-up sorrow. The tears rolled down her cheeks and neck as she sobbed.

When Nickoli slipped into the adjacent seat and closed the door, he turned his head to face her. His face was pale and his eyes dark. He gathered her up in his large embrace and pressed her to his heart. "What is it, Ella? Is it the piano?" His breath was warm on the back of her neck and caused a thrill of heat to travel down her spine. "I am so sorry I could not save her for you." He ran his fingers through her hair and kissed the crown of her head.

He pulled back from her to reach into his breast pocket and retrieve a freshly laundered and

folded handkerchief. He dabbed away at her wet face, then handed the handkerchief to her. Ella inhaled the essence of Nickoli in the handkerchief, a mixture of fresh air, sandalwood, and his own special scent.

How could she tell him that she was crying because, like the piano, she had once been loved then turned out into the cold when Mark's love fell to another woman? He could never imagine what it was like for her when she read the wedding announcement for Mark McKinnett and Sandra Duffy. A mutual friend informed her that the happy bride went to the altar pregnant.

Mark had always told Ella that he didn't want children for at least five years to give them a chance to settle into their marriage and for him to become established in the law firm where he hoped to become a partner. The hurt cut deep that he had lied to her. He just didn't want children with *her*. No, she couldn't tell Nickoli that she still felt this terrible anger and hurt toward Mark. She didn't want to see the disappointment in his eyes that he was sure to have if he knew she couldn't move past her feelings for Mark.

Instead, she nodded and let him believe that her sorrow was only for the piano.

* * * *

In the days that followed, Ella was so busy with recitals that she had not had time to drop by the shop and see Nickoli or to drive by to see how the piano was faring. It was unsettling how much she missed seeing Nickoli, but she had decided that, after Mark had hurt her, there would be no more broken hearts for her. Love was too hard.

Besides, Nickoli was her friend. If he rejected her, they could not return to the amicable relationship they now shared. What would she ever do without Nickoli? No. She was not about to lose him. It was better for both of them if she did not entertain any romantic notions for Nickoli Vesa.

As the holidays approached, Ella's heart filled with dread. Her mother would expect her to come to Independence for Thanksgiving. Her two older sisters-in-law, with her brothers as doting husbands and their broods of children, would be there to celebrate the holiday. How wonderful their lives were when compared to hers. They both had someone to love, to cuddle up with at night and tell the stories of how their days went. Miranda's and Jane's lives were filled with family activities and PTA meetings. What would either of them know of loneliness and rejection? They had never experienced it.

They had witnessed Ella's rejection on that terrible day when Mark abandoned her at the altar. They probably felt pity for her in her misery. Ella was certain that they didn't mean to lord it over her how happy they were with their lives filled with love while she was still single, unable to find a man to love her. They were too involved in their own lives. Her brothers had offered to find Mark and "beat the crap out of him," but that would have just made everything worse. After two years, they said she ought to just get over him and move on. What did they know? They were men and caught up in the happiness of their own lives.

As she pulled into Nickoli's driveway, an idea came to mind that might just help her get through the holidays.

Chapter Four

Nickoli came out to meet her as if he had been watching for her out the window. Her heart leaped as she observed him hurrying to her car, his long, dark coat billowing in the breeze and molding to his lean, tall physique. His dark hair ruffled as the wind swept through it, and his coffee eyes grew warm at the sight of her.

Always a gentleman with manners imprinted from his old-world father, Nickoli opened the door for her and took her hand to help her out of the car. His smile lit up her world with its contagious joy. “Come, *mi iubesc*, I have prepared a delicious meal for you. It must not become cold.”

“Oh my gosh, you cooked?” Ella gushed with pleasure at his warm reception. “I can’t believe you went to such trouble.”

He spoke as he guided her into the house. “Is happy I am to do nice things for you.” His broken English endeared him to her. She knew it became more broken when he became excited about something. It pleased her that he was so obvious with his happiness at seeing her.

They stamped the snow from their feet and entered the warmth of Nickoli’s house. Delicious aromas greeted her when she entered. Ella’s breath left her when they entered the dining room and she saw the beautiful table set with a crisp linen tablecloth, Noritake china with an azalea pattern, and candles warming the room with their glow. A fire burning in the fireplace that Nickoli had added to the dining room lent a special cheer to the room. Her heart turned over in her chest with joy knowing the attention to detail he made and that he did it all for her.

He helped her out of her coat and pulled out a chair for her next to his. “Make yourself comfortable while I bring out our meal.”

“Let me help you.” Ella attempted to get up and follow him to the kitchen, but he gently pushed her back down.

“Is for me to do. Here, drink some of the wine while I go to the kitchen. I think you will like it.” Then he left through the kitchen door that swung shut behind him.

The wine was perfect. Like sun-heated honey, it warmed her as it went down. Ella settled back into her chair and practiced in her mind how she would present her idea to Nickoli.

When Nickoli returned with a tureen of creamy potato soup, freshly baked bread cut in thick slices with butter, and a fruit salad, Ella’s head was swimming in thoughts. Nickoli loved to cook, and he was excellent at it. Cooking was just one of the many interests they had in common. He seated himself at the end of the table next to her, put his napkin in his lap, served her, then waited for her to taste it and make her comment.

Ella forced herself to focus on the food. The velvety soup was rich with cream and contained just enough cheese to taste but not overwhelm it. If she had died and gone to heaven, she could not have had better-tasting bread with its subtle herb and yeast taste. She raised her head and met his dark eyes. “It is beyond scrumptious, Nick. I hope you made a barrelful because I have to have a second helping of this.”

Nickoli laughed with the kind of laughter that warmed Ella all the way to her core. “No, *comoara mea*, save some room. I have also made rosemary-seasoned chicken and marinated asparagus. For dessert, I have made you strawberry tarts.”

Ella gasped. “I love strawberry tarts—strawberry anything, actually.”

Nickoli nodded his head, smiling. “I know.”

Mark had never known that. He had not remembered her birthday, how she hated cauliflower, or that she loved strawberries. She wondered if Mark knew these details about his new bride. With effort, Ella pushed these acrimonious thoughts from her mind.

By the time they began to eat the strawberry tarts, Ella had gathered the courage together to tell Nickoli her newly formulated plan. After laying her fork down and leaning back in her chair, Ella

spoke before she lost her nerve. “I have something I want to discuss with you, Nick. It’s about the Thanksgiving holidays.”

He gathered up their dishes. “I bring the coffee, and we talk.”

“Here, Nick, let me help,” she said, getting up from her chair and reaching for the dish of leftover tarts, but Nickoli held up his hand to stop her.

“No. You sit by the fire while I clean up. I bring your coffee to you there.”

She knew him well enough to know it was a losing battle to insist and went into the living room to sit in one of the comfortable wing-backed chairs by the fire. The flames licking the applewood logs filled the room with a pleasant fragrance that warmed her, loosening her muscles, and the meal made her feel drowsy.

In a few minutes, Nick returned with a tray holding a silver service including a pot of coffee, a creamer, sugar bowl, and two delicate china cups and saucers that matched the dishes they had eaten from at supper. He set it on a small table between the chairs. Without finding it necessary to ask her, he fixed her coffee with two spoons of sugar and a dollop of cream, just the way she liked it.

There were a few minutes of cozy silence before Ella told Nickoli her plan. “You know how I have been dreading going home to my parents’ house in Independence for Thanksgiving.” She rolled her eyes comically. “My two brothers will be there with their wives and their brood of kids, along with my busybody parents and younger sister. They’ll all start talking about their families, and then they’ll turn their conversation to me.”

She swallowed against the acidic feelings that came to the surface. “They’ll all dive into my private business. Have I got a boyfriend yet? Am I dating anyone special? When am I going to get over being jilted at the altar?” The memory surfaced, and the pain of it pierced her chest. She swallowed hard and made herself go on. “I just can’t face them alone—again. I don’t want them feeling sorry for me. I especially don’t want them to remind me for the hundredth time that my biological clock is ticking. Mom will have to go on and on ad nauseam about life not being full unless a woman has children. She’ll just have to ask me when I’m going to give her more grandchildren.”

Ella drew in a deep, calming breath while Nickoli quietly waited for her to continue speaking. The backs of her eyes burned with humiliation. “I just can’t do it, Nick. I want to see them, and I would love to spend Thanksgiving with them, but not if I have to endure an inquisition.”

“What would make you happy then?” Nickoli asked the question quietly.

“I want to take a boyfriend with me, a fiancé, actually. Well, not actually a real boyfriend except that they would think he is my boyfriend.” She could barely make herself go on. Nickoli’s face seemed to pale, and his eyes darkened though he remained silent.

She summoned up all her courage. “I want you to go home with me for Thanksgiving. We can pretend we’re in love. It will make them happy, and I won’t have to face them and all their nagging.” She sighed heavily. “It would save me from the torment of their well-meaning questions.”

“You want to *pretend*.” He seemed to put a strange emphasis on the word that made Ella’s stomach clench.

“Well, yes. Would it be that hard for you to pretend to care for me that way?” A little knot formed in her throat that hurt her, reminding her of Mark and his casual disregard for her feelings.

He shook his head, but his expression seemed shadowed as his lips thinned in a frown. “No. I would not have to pretend to care.”

He was such a dear. He was like a comfortable pair of shoes that never pinched your feet. “Wonderful. Oh, thank you, Nick. You’ve saved me.” She leaned toward him and kissed him on his mouth. His firm lips responded, kissing her back, and a little thrill ran up her spine and quickened in her chest.

“What if we must sleep in same room?” Nick’s eyes darkening as he kept them on her. His

hands clenched in his lap, and a muscle worked in his jaw.

"We'll think of something. We could roll up a quilt and put it between us if you think I might attack you." Ella could not help but laugh at the shocked expression on his face.

"Is no need for that. I trust you." A smile lifted Nickoli's lips, and his eyes twinkled with mischief. He was silent for a moment, took a sip of coffee, and then asked, "How big are your brothers?"

Ella almost blew her coffee out of her nose. "They're big, but I think you can take them, Nick."

He smiled, then got up from his chair and extended his hand to help her up. "Come. We play the piano."

Ella thoroughly enjoyed playing the piano with Nickoli. When he and his father left Romania and the hard life under the Communist regime and the poverty of their country, all that they could afford to take were the clothes on their backs and a few pages of his mother's music tucked into their pockets. With the money they had sewn into their clothes, eighteen-year-old Nickoli and his father came to America and started life over again. The sheets of music his mother had composed meant even more to Nickoli after his father died only a few years after they opened the piano shop in the United States.

As Ella settled hip to hip with Nickoli on the piano stool, she reflected on how hard life had been for him. He never complained. Never once had Ella heard him express the slightest resentment over his lost childhood or the circumstances of his life in Romania.

The warmth of his body radiated to her, and the close proximity of it made Ella's heart skip. When Nickoli began the piece and Ella joined in, the harmony of their music soothed her rough nerves and eased her heart. As they finished the last few bars, Ella glanced up and saw the light in Nickoli's eyes and the smile on his generous lips, and it made her heart glad. He had a lean build with powerful muscles from lifting and working with heavy pianos and taut piano wire. Even though he was a man, she thought him beautiful.

Outside the window, snow softly drifted down in big flakes. Ella thought about the piano out there in that man's yard wearing its coat of winter white. Her heart turned over, and her joy evaporated.

Nickoli placed his arm around her shoulders and drew her close to his side. As if reading her thoughts, he spoke to her softly. "I am so sorry, *comoara mea*, but there is nothing we can do."

Chapter Five

Before Ella and Nickoli left town to spend Thanksgiving with her family, she asked Nickoli to drive by the house where the piano sat out in the elements. Nickoli parked the SUV, and Ella opened the door to step outside and look at the piano. There it stood like a brave soldier, silent in its despair and covered in snow. One of the ornately carved legs had rotted away and lay on the ground beside it, causing the piano to list to that side. It resembled an old ship that had taken a huge wave and, as the water began to fill its hull, was sinking slowly into the sea. The wooden underside of the keys had begun to swell and dislodge from the smooth white pads. The black keys had eroded to splinters, and the top of the piano had caved in on the piano wires.

Ella returned to the SUV and got in but could not take her eyes off what was left of the piano even as they drove away from the pitiful sight. She choked back a sob at the sorrowful plight of the piano. How could that awful man watch this happen to such a beautiful instrument? The piano could have brought the joy of music to so many. How much hatred could he possibly have to find delight in watching the destruction of his wife's piano? What a despicable human being.

Nickoli drove the car to the side of the road and stopped. He turned to Ella and gathered her up into his arms. "You must stop mourning, *inima mea*. Until you stop longing for things to be different, you cannot change your future. You cannot let happiness in. You understand, yes?"

She knew that he was not talking to her about the piano. He was talking about Mark. There was no way for him to understand the pain she still felt from Mark's rejection. The memory of her standing there at the front of the church with her friends and family all present as her father announced there would be no wedding that day was still sharp enough to cut into her heart.

"I need time, Nick. I can't just let it go like it never happened." She pushed back from his embrace and met his eyes. "It's the worst thing that ever happened to me."

He did not take his eyes from hers. Removing his hands from around her, he moved back into his seat. "All is required, you let go. Stop looking back, or you cannot see where you are going."

Ella broke eye contact and turned her head away from him to stare out the window at the cold, snow-covered ground. "You'll never understand, Nick. I don't want to talk about it. Let's just go." She said the last words under her breath so that her words were barely audible.

His heavy sigh felt like a judgment of her feelings, and a ripple of anger threaded its way up into her throat. As he drove the car back onto the road and headed for the highway, Ella felt the resentment dig into her chest.

It wasn't until Nickoli pulled onto the highway headed north that Ella was able to speak to him again. In her heart, she knew she was being unfair to him, but she just couldn't seem to stop herself. He had nothing to do with what had happened to her and Mark. Her friendship with Nick had just begun shortly before her engagement to Mark. No. It wasn't his fault.

Nick had suffered through his own hardships. She admired the way he kept his optimism even in the worst of his troubles. Maybe it was because he was a man. Women must feel things more deeply than men do. She knew when she thought it that it wasn't true, but she didn't want to scrutinize her own feelings and behavior, or she would just feel worse. Ella wished she could be more like Nickoli, strong and resilient.

They traveled in silence for a few miles until Ella finally spoke. "I'm sorry, Nick. I don't really mean to act like such a weakling or to behave like an ass. Seeing the piano like that and knowing that horrible man did it on purpose just brings up feelings I thought I was done with."

He stretched his arm over and covered her hand with his. He nodded his head. "I know." Turning his head for a moment, he took his eyes from the road to glance at her. He chuckled. "You get up on wrong side of bed."

"Good attempt at an old cliché, Nick." She had to laugh, too. The atmosphere lightened, and the

rest of the trip to her hometown in Independence, Maine, was spent talking about gardening and singing songs from the eighties. Nickoli had a beautiful voice, full and deep.

By the time they pulled into the long driveway of her parents' home, they were in good humor. The sign displayed read Hill Top Blueberry Farm with a little sign beneath saying "Closed until summer." Pine trees swayed in the wind, and snow fell against the windshield. Nickoli shifted down to better maneuver on the compacted snow.

They rounded the curve of the drive, and suddenly the familiar sight of the Victorian house where she grew up greeted them with warm lights and wood smoke spewing from several chimneys. Her heart grew glad at the sight of home. Laughter bubbled up from her throat and spilled into the car.

Nickoli glanced over at her and grinned. "I make your parents happy for you."

At first, Ella was at loss as to what he meant until she remembered that he was going to be posing as her fiancé. A little stab of conscience nibbled at her. She didn't like deceiving her family, but she wanted them to believe that she had found love again and was happy.

Her brothers must have already arrived because she noticed that the walkway and steps were clear of snow and ice. She would be so happy to see them, their wives, who were like sisters, and all her nieces and nephews.

Relatives spilled out of the house to greet her and Nickoli. She knew they were all eager to meet her fiancé and curious about him. They had heard her speak of him many times, but now, he was her love and not just her friend. She hoped they could convince them that they were in love.

Nickoli cut off the engine and exited the car. He quickly made his way to her door and opened it for her. He helped her from the car and lent her his arm as they made their way to the waiting throng. Greetings and hugs ensued as Ella fell into the warm embrace of her family. She stepped back after the initial welcome and introduced them to Nickoli.

Nickoli shook hands with her father and brothers and bowed to the females of the family in a quaint gesture of respect he had learned from his homeland. Her heart ached with the pretense in which she had asked him to participate. He seemed so earnest, as if the whole thing was real. She never would have asked him to pretend to be her fiancé unless she was desperate. With her family constantly asking her about her love life since her horrible non-wedding day, she felt compelled to create a romance to calm their fears. She wanted them to believe that she had moved on from that painful day when Mark left her standing at the altar.

Angeline, her fifteen-year-old baby sister, blushed and gushed over Nickoli. With pink cheeks and bright eyes, Angeline held on to Nickoli's hand when he extended it in greeting. "You are so cute," she said and giggled.

"Thank you, Miss Angeline. Coming from such a lovely young woman, such a compliment means all the more."

What a gentleman.

"You two come on in and warm yourselves. Winter's early this year," her father said, waving them into the house. He turned to Ella's two brothers. "Rudy, would you bring in their luggage, please?" He waved to the other brother who was dealing with a fussy baby. "Leo, that baby is going to catch her death out here. Why don't you take her on upstairs and see if she'll take a nap? That squalling is making your mother nervous, son."

Of course, the crying baby wasn't making Ella's mother nervous one bit. Mom could handle a house on fire, crying babies, and a hurricane and still get dinner on the table without flinching. Daddy, on the other hand, wanted order and quiet or he got cranky. Ella thought that had to be proof that opposites attract.

"No. No, do not trouble yourselves," Nickoli protested. "I bring in the luggage. Tell me where to put it." He directed his question to Ella's mother.

Wiping her hands on her apron, her mother replied, "You and Ella will be upstairs in the last room on the right." She smiled as she combed her medium-length hair with her hand. "It's Ella's old room and overlooks the pond out back."

So, they would be sharing a room after all. Ella hoped that Nickoli would be comfortable with that arrangement. Even though they had talked about the possibility of sleeping in the same room, she wanted to be sure that he wouldn't feel awkward with the situation. Of course, she was only fooling herself because, truthfully, it was she who felt ill at ease with the situation. Nonetheless, if she was going to convince her family that she had moved on and found love once again, she was going to have to act her part as the devoted girlfriend. It wouldn't be that hard. Nickoli was her dearest friend.

As Nickoli and Rudy gathered up their luggage from the back of Nickoli's SUV, Ella noticed that he appeared casual and quite comfortable, without the slightest indication of self-consciousness. So much for that worry. Ella followed the men in carrying her overnight case containing her makeup and toiletries.

Once inside her old room, she sat on the edge of the bed covered with her old pink satin comforter. "Good grief, Mom, you could have at least made it look a little more grown-up in here. She picked up the stuffed Scottie dog that had once been her favorite toy and held it in her lap as she watched her family drag in the luggage, then gather outside her room in the hallway. Nickoli gave her a covert glance and smiled as if enjoying the awkwardness he probably knew she was experiencing.

Ignoring Ella's comment, her mother walked around the room skimming her hand over the furniture and curtains as if removing imaginary dust. She stopped beside Ella and ran her hand down Ella's cheek. "I didn't want to change it. I liked keeping it the way it was when you were here. Rudy and Leo live nearby, and I see them every day since they work with Daddy here on the farm, and Angeline is still with us, but you live away from us now, and I miss you."

Ella rose from the bed and threw her arms around her mother. "Oh, Mom, it's so wonderful to be home. I've missed you, too."

Her mother hugged her tightly, then stepped back and opened her arms to Nickoli. "Come and let me hug you, Nick. I know you'll take good care of our girl. She talks so much about you, and I know how much you've helped her. I am so happy to meet you at last."

Nickoli smiled as he gathered Ella and her mother in his arms, towering over them. "I am pleased to be here. Is an honor for me."

"Can I have a hug, too?" Angeline asked as she watched them from the doorway.

Rudy ruffled her hair and shoved her down the hall. "I think he's taken, peanut. You'll have to find your own boyfriend."

Ella's mother stepped back from them. "You two settle in and freshen up here. I need to go on down and finish dinner before your dad dies of starvation and your brothers' wives end up doing all the work." She walked toward the door. "Miranda is making some homemade bread, and Jane has made a cheesecake. They are wonderful cooks. Come to the kitchen when you're ready, and we'll have a little gabfest."

"See you in just a bit, Mom." Ella turned back to see a strange expression on Nickoli's face. "What?"

"Is wonderful, your family. How can you bear to live away from them?"

Ella did not miss the look of longing in his eyes as he spoke. She was tempted to caress his cheek but felt ill at ease touching him in such an intimate way.

Since his father had died, Nickoli had no family left. She didn't know if there was anyone left in Romania. If there was, he never spoke of them. She moved away feeling awkward and sad for him but unable to think of what to say, so she sat on the floor in front of her old oak dresser and pulled

her suitcase close to her crossed legs. Nickoli sat on the end of the bed and watched her.

As she pulled out a drawer and started putting her things away, she glanced at Nickoli. “I didn’t want to have them hovering over me and asking me questions about the time when Mark jilted me. It was all just too humiliating, you know. And I didn’t want to hang around here and have people whispering behind my back.” She turned away from his gaze. “I heard that Mark’s new wife went to the altar pregnant. So I guess that whole thing about him not wanting kids to overpopulate the world was just baloney.” She stole a glance at Nickoli, who had a tired expression, and added, “It was just me he didn’t want to have kids with.” She felt the familiar burn behind her eyes when she thought about Mark. “Well, I hope they are very happy with their perfect little family.” She couldn’t keep the bitterness from edging into her voice.

Nickoli slid off the end of the bed and knelt beside her where she sat in front of the dresser folding her T-shirts. “The more you think about Mark’s life, the less you think about your own.” He leaned toward her and kissed her forehead. He smiled then. “Perhaps we play our music for your family after supper. Yes?”

Ella rose to her knees and kissed him on the lips. A wave of heat ran through her, and without knowing why, she kissed him again.

Chapter Six

Nickoli could not help himself. The taste of her was overpowering. After all this time, could she begin now to have feelings for him? Could he be that fortunate? He stood, taking her with him, and drew her into his embrace tighter. He deepened the kiss as she opened to him. The light fragrance of roses titillated him further until he thought he might not be able to stop. His tongue played with hers, which seemed to raise the temperature in the room and cause great discomfort in his groin.

He knew it was too much, too soon. She would only despise him for taking advantage of her this way. Nickoli pulled away from the kiss and gently set her away from him before he did something he knew he would later regret.

"I am sorry." Passion roughened his voice. "I should not kiss you this way." He bent over to pick up the clothes she dropped on the floor in front of the open drawer. When he realized they were her lacy bras and panties, he felt a surge of desire and embarrassment rolled into one. He flung the titillating garments onto the bed, turned back to face her, and saw that she had a smile on her lips.

"Is funny to you now?" What could she be thinking to laugh at such a moment?

Ella nodded her head. "I don't know who is more embarrassed, you or me." She touched his cheek with her fingertips.

Her touch branded him with an energy that only made his yearning for her increase. He felt compelled to move away from her or make love to her. The only decent alternative was to recoil from her touch, lest she bewitch him. When he turned his cheek from her touch, she withdrew her hand, and the brightness in her eyes faded as if the blue had turned to gray. Her smile retreated, leaving her face emotionless as if she had put on a mask. Her arms dropped to her sides, and she turned her back to him.

He had unintentionally hurt her. He wanted to rip out his heart for it. With caution, as if approaching a wild horse that might bolt at the smallest sound, he stepped toward her. Slowly, he placed his hands on her shoulders and pulled her back to rest against his body. "You misunderstand, *inima mea*. I am a guest here in your parents' house. I cannot take advantage of their daughter under their own roof. This would be disrespect of them and you." It wasn't the real truth, but it was the only one that he dared to tell her.

"I get it, Nick. You don't have to explain." She sounded as dull and flat as the look in her eyes after he backed away from their kiss. "You don't have to act like my boyfriend except when we're around my family." She stepped away from him and returned to sit on the floor. She refused to look at him.

Frustration caused Nickoli to sigh deeply. "*Vreau tu*. I want you, but not like this." He wished his English were better so that he could explain how he really felt, how he loved her and had always loved her. When she went to the church that day to marry Mark, his heart felt as if it had been cut in two. He felt guilty because he was relieved that Mark had not been the man she had thought him to be.

Two years had gone by, and still she could not see how much he cared for her. Still, she longed for the man who let her go. Well, he had not left a Communist government, come to a foreign land he knew very little about with nothing but his father and some sheets of music to become discouraged now. He rallied his determination to win the trust and affections of the woman he loved.

Nickoli wanted Ella more than he wanted his next breath, but he realized she would never be open to his love until she let go of the mistrust and hurt that Mark had created in her by his despicable rejection of her. It was a formidable task, but he refused to be deterred.

Just how he was going to accomplish his goal was yet to be determined, but he must find a way.

She liked kissing him. He smiled inwardly at her warm response when he returned and deepened her kiss. Kissing was good. He would find reasons to kiss her, and often. With the pretense that they were engaged, he could find opportunities to show her affection without hindrance as long as her family was present. It was when they were alone that he must use a more careful strategy. Gentle persuasion would be paramount.

He watched her for a moment as she returned to her chore of putting away her things with her back turned to him. He knelt beside her again and bent his head down enough to make eye contact with her. "I apologize. I am boorish and felt I would frighten you." He attempted a smile and touched her cheek with his fingertips. "You can forgive?"

He felt her relax beneath his hand as he moved it to rest on her back. She sighed and turned her face toward his but kept her gaze on the floor.

"It's so easy to forgive you, Nick." She reached out and took his hand to squeeze it for a moment. "I'm just tense. I know my parents and siblings want me to be happy, and maybe I'm trying too hard." She raised her beautiful green eyes, like deep jade, to peer into his. "I'm being silly and too sensitive."

Nickoli settled down beside her and leaned his back against the foot of her bed. Without thinking about it, he smoothed her back with his hand. He wondered for a moment if he should make a daring proposal, then made up his mind to press on. "Perhaps we should try something different."

He watched as she folded her lacy underthings and placed them in the drawer. Just thinking about what those near-transparent things covered sent his heart racing and his loins aching. He hoped she would hurry with her task before he found it impossible to resist removing her clothing to see what lay beneath. Was she wearing such delicate undergarments now? He swallowed hard trying to force his sensual thoughts from forming into action he was certain he would regret.

"What do you mean?" She leaned back against the bed and lifted her arms to stretch them above her head. The action caused her firm breasts to lift against the fabric of her sweater.

He suddenly realized that she wasn't wearing a bra when he saw her nipples pucker the thin layer of material separating her breasts from his touch. He became hard just looking at her breasts and had to force his gaze up to her face. "It is difficult to be affectionate like lovers when your family is present, then withdraw when we are alone. Perhaps, is easier to act like lovers even alone."

"Are you kidding me?" She gave him a full and intense gaze. "Are you just trying to seduce me?" She let out a heavy sigh and leaned forward, covering her breasts with her arms folded across her chest. "Please tell me you're not like all those guys who treat a woman great just trying to get in bed with her. I thought you were better than that." She stood up and moved away from him to put her suitcase in the closet.

This was not going well. He had made a tactical error. He jumped up and followed her across the expanse of the room. "No. Oh, please, no." He wanted to pull her to him but resisted, knowing that would only make her mistrust him more. "I mean that it would be more convincing and easier if we are affectionate even in private. Otherwise, I feel like we are putting on a show. As friends we often embrace and kiss."

"Not like we kissed a few minutes ago," she retorted with her back straight and her head held high.

He couldn't help it. He chuckled. Wasn't she adorable? She looked like a warrior, but it wasn't battle he wanted to convey. "I liked it." He said it simply, but there were so many other feelings beneath the words that he must not allow her to see—not yet.

Her shoulders relaxed, and her smile returned. "I liked it, too." Her smile vanished for a moment. "I think I liked it more than you did, and that's why you pulled away."

"Ah, so you think I am opportunist." He had not thought of that. "I did not want to go too far."

He could not keep the corners of his mouth from lifting into a smile. "I am a man after all, *comoara mea*."

She smiled back. "Believe me, I am well aware of that." She seemed to be thinking for a moment, then added, "Are you flirting with me, Nickoli?"

He laughed and nodded his head. "Yes, is me flirting."

The tension left the air, and they both laughed heartily. She came to him then, her delicate scent assaulting his senses, and wrapped her arms around his waist. "This is kind of fun, pretending to be in love."

The word *pretending* bit into his heart, but he let it pass. He was making progress. "Yes, but we pretend it all the time, yes?"

She nodded her head enthusiastically. "Yes. Yes, that's a wonderful idea, Nick. That way we don't have to keep shifting in and out of love mode. It's like Method acting."

"So, we do this?" He was afraid she might change her mind.

"I think it's a great idea. It isn't like we're going to throw down on the carpet and rip each other's clothes off, but it helps to keep the illusion of being in love." She stood on her tiptoes and kissed the underside of his jaw, which sent a surge of heat straight down to his loins.

His breathing hastened, and his heart raced. The heavy surge of his erection pressing on the front of his jeans was almost painful. *Method acting, indeed*. The only thing he was pretending was that he wasn't in love with her. More than anything, he wanted to feel her wrap him in the circle of her legs and ask him to press his erection into the warmth of her body. With great difficulty, he pushed his sexual desire for her to the back of his mind. He must walk a fine line between intimacy and lust. It was like straddling a sharp sword, but the prize he hoped to win was worth any discomfort now.

Bending his head down, he took her mouth with his own and pressed his tongue inside. With delight, he felt her give way to his kiss and respond. Tentatively, he ran his hand up the column of her neck as he drew her closer with his other arm. It seemed that she molded her body to his and the heat intensified. In a bold move, he ran his hand down from her neck to gently mold her breast and tease her nipple. He was encouraged when she didn't pull away. In fact, she leaned into his hand, pressing her swollen nipple into it.

With his heart pounding in the confines of his ribs, he withdrew from the kiss to lower his mouth to her nipple and sucked it through the thin sweater. The tender morsel grew hard in his mouth as she moaned with the pleasure he brought her. Her slender arms wove around his shoulders as she pulled him closer to her. He prayed he could stop before he went too far.

Possessed by his passion, he slipped his hand down to smooth the contours of her abdomen. He felt her heart quicken beneath his cheek and her breath catch as he unbuttoned the top of her jeans and unzipped them. Slowly he lowered his hand beneath her jeans and the scrap of lace that covered her nether parts. He hoped that she would not bolt until he could bring her the pleasure that he wanted to give her.

She spread her legs, which made it easier for him to maneuver. Encouraged by her movements but prepared to stop if she refused him, he pushed her jeans and delicate panties down, exposing her curls to his view. He teased her other breast with his mouth as he slipped his fingers down and separated her delicate feminine folds. The heaviness of his erection ached, but he would not allow himself the pleasure of taking her. He only wanted to pleasure her without frightening her with his own needs.

He found her woman's pearl and while rubbing it gently, delighted in her moans and gasps. She placed her hands on either side of his head and ran her fingers like combs through his hair as the tension increased. Keeping his voice low, he said, "Lie down, *puteti*. Let me bring you pleasure."

When she did as he asked and lay on the bed, he removed her jeans and panties, tenderly messaging her legs and feet as he did so, then knelt on the floor between her spread legs. With her

legs draped over his shoulders, he opened her and licked her nether lips, then took her tender nub into his mouth, and sucked her hard. She smelled sweet, like a peach, and tasted ripe and delicious. She gasped and writhed with his ministrations. He glanced up to see her knot her fists in the sheets as her passion surged. Buoyed by her reaction, he placed a finger inside her and delighted when her vagina clenched it in its warmth.

His own breathing became rapid as he felt her beginning to spasm. He licked her clitoris, sucked hard on it, inserted another finger inside her, and moved them in and out of her, rubbing her G-spot intentionally to bring her to release.

Her hips rose up as she groaned with excitement. Then she bucked and moaned as the shudders of release overtook her. He eased from her and slid down beside her on the bed where he gathered her in his arms and held her as she eased back to Earth.

His heart beat faster when she wrapped her arms around his waist and pulled closer to him. He reached behind her and pulled the pink quilt up over them to create a warm cocoon for them to lie in.

"My God, Nick, that was great." She spoke breathlessly against his chest, her words flowing over his skin, warm and moist.

"Now we are more like lovers, yes? Not so much pretend." He wanted to shout with joy. Ella had allowed him to pleasure her, and now she pulled him close to her as if they were truly in love. His joy was tainted only by the knowledge that sex and love are not the same thing. He had five days to make her see how much he cared for her. Somewhere inside her heart, there had to be room for him. All she had to do was let go of the lost love to make a place for him.

She giggled and kissed the groove at the base of his neck. "I don't think pretending was ever this much fun." She reached for his hand and kissed his palm, sending rivers of fire rushing to every inch of his body. "I would have never guessed you could . . . you know . . . do such exciting things."

Nickoli had to laugh then. He kissed her softly. "I could do again if you want."

Before she could answer him, there was a soft knock on the door, and her brother Rudy, his voice muffled by the thickness of the door, said, "Hey, you two lovebirds, quit what you're doing. Supper's ready."

"We'll be right there," Ella called back.

Rudy's laughter faded as he walked away from the door, and his heavy footsteps could be heard going down the hall and then descending the stairs.

Ella rolled away from him to get up and pulled on her clothes. He missed her heat. He sat up, put his feet on the floor, and stood. "We will do better now. Your family will believe." Who was he fooling? Surely she was beginning to realize that he had feelings for her that had little to do with friendship.

Ella seemed dazed as she finished dressing and stared out the window for a moment. Then, as if she had made her mind up about something, she grabbed his hand and pulled him along with her out of the room. Her voice shook when she spoke to him. "All right then, let the show begin."

It wasn't what he was hoping to hear. As they descended the stairs, Nickoli reminded himself that he had a few days to win her heart, and he would do his best to show her how much he cared for her. He didn't want to pretend.

Chapter Seven

Ella seemed to thrum with ill-contained energy as she helped her younger sister clear the table and rinse the dishes to stack in the dishwasher. All through dinner, she had had to keep staring at her plate to avoid making eye contact with Nickoli. Dear God, what had she done? What must he think of her? She practically threw herself at him. Now she had ruined a perfectly wonderful friendship.

Nevertheless, her thoughts kept running like wild horses beyond her control to the way he made her feel. He had made love to her—well, sort of—in her childhood bedroom. It was the same bedroom where she spent her teen years dreaming of Johnny Depp, wondering who she would marry, and guessing how many children she would have. All her secrets were in that room.

She felt vulnerable and ashamed. He was probably plotting his escape right now. She had gone and ruined everything. In the back of her mind, she wondered why Nickoli had been so caught up in his lovemaking. Could she be wrong about their friendship? Was it possible that Nickoli was developing deeper feelings for her? She quickly pushed that thought out of her mind. He was her friend and nothing more.

Angeline put the last dish in the dishwasher and snapped the lid shut. The soft whirl of the machine started up when her little sister pressed the button. “If you decide not to marry him, can I have him?” she asked smiling up at Ella. “He has got to be the hottest man on Earth, and good grief, that accent is just yummy.”

Ella turned to Angeline with her hands on her hips in an intentionally dramatic stance. “You’ll have to find your own man with an accent, Ang, because Nick is taken.” She could not help but smile at her baby sister’s obvious enthusiasm over Nickoli.

Suddenly he was there, standing beside her with his arm around her, grinning. “What are you two ladies talking about?” he asked innocently. He bent his head, which caused a raven lock to fall across his brow as he kissed her cheek.

“Men and you,” Angeline answered and giggled.

“Are you ready to play for your family, *comoara mea*?”

Angeline giggled again and blushed. Ella rolled her eyes at her sister. She really couldn’t blame her impressionable sister for having a little crush on Nickoli. He was exotically beautiful with his angular face, Roman nose, generous lips, and waves of silky black hair that met with his collar and begged to be touched.

“Get a grip, Ang.” The nearness of Nickoli was causing a riot of emotions to run out of control inside her. She felt suddenly shy in his presence. He seemed too big with broad shoulders and muscular arms that made her feel small and fragile in comparison. “Yes, Nick, I’m ready to play. Let’s go in the living room and join the others.”

He placed his hand at the small of her back and guided her into the room where her family gathered to listen to her and Nickoli play. A twinge of guilt skittered across her heart remembering that she was deceiving them, but she was determined not to spend another holiday with them worrying about her love life.

Without bidding, the thought crossed her mind about Mark and his new wife. She imagined them cuddled up at his parents’ house for the holidays. Everyone was probably making a fuss over his new wife’s pregnancy. *I hope the baby keeps them awake every night for a year.* A niggles of guilt ate at the edges of her mind at her own sour thoughts. Well, she deserved the right to be bitter. They had been having an affair behind her back the whole time she was busy making wedding plans for a wedding that would never happen.

Her family clapped as she and Nick entered the room. “Time for some entertainment,” Rudy shouted.

Leo whistled shrilly while her parents laughed and Angeline looked dreamy-eyed at Nickoli. His laughter flowed over her like a soothing balm. Even if they weren't really in love, he was her best friend, and he was special to her. That he consented to play out this romantic farce for her sake made her grateful for him. After he guided her to the piano bench and allowed her to be seated first, Nickoli sat down beside her. He lowered his head to make eye contact with her, smiling his white, warming smile, and asked, "Are you ready?"

Ella nodded her head. "What shall we play?"

"Something cheerful," he answered, giving her a look that said he read her acidic thoughts.

They played the Thanksgiving song, "Over the River and Through the Woods," followed by a most appropriate "Let it Snow." They combined their voices with their talents on the piano, and the family joined in with the songs. Beyond the large picture window, flakes of snow drifted to Earth.

After an hour or so, Ella's father suggested they go for a sleigh ride and enjoy the snow. Rudy and Leo begged off, explaining, with regret, that they had small children that needed to be put to bed. After bidding her brothers, their wives, and children good night, Ella and Nickoli joined her parents and Angeline out in the barn that smelled of fresh hay, old wood, and horses.

Nickoli glanced about the barn and commented to Ella, "Your parents have horses, cows, and chickens. It must take much work to take care of the place."

"Oh, our boys help us out with the animals, the blueberries, and apple trees, and then there's the Christmas trees—pungent Douglas Firs," her mother said.

Her father waved Nickoli over to help him lift the canvas tarp off the sled resting to the right of the barn. A chicken flew squawking across the barn apparently upset about being disturbed from its resting place. The two men pushed the sled to the double doors at the front of the barn, then started hitching up the two Percheron horses. Ella, her mother, and Angeline took old T-shirts and began wiping down the dusty leather seats of the sled. Once the horses were hitched to the sled, they all helped to move it outside, onto the snow, where it slid with ease.

They all piled in and covered themselves with heavy wool blankets Ella and her mother had brought from the house. Her mother and father sat in the driver's seat to lead the horses, and Angeline settled in close beside Nickoli. He smiled at Ella, and she knew by the mischievous look in his eyes that he was very much aware of Angeline's crush on him.

Turning to Angeline, Nickoli pulled the blankets up over the girl's shoulders in a sweet gesture. "Is warm enough?" he asked her.

"As long as we sit close, I think I'll be warm enough." With that being said, Angeline scooted closer to her new male idol.

Nickoli glanced at Ella and winked. He drew Ella to his side and kept his arm around her, spilling his warmth over to her.

The night was clear, a navy canopy sprinkled with sparkling stars. Plumes of visible breath billowed from the nostrils and mouths of horses and humans and evaporated into the cold, crisp air. The sleigh moved smoothly over the thick layers of snow, which made a whispery crunching sound under the rails. The metal parts of the traces and bridles of the huge, muscular horses jingled merrily as they trotted along. The tangy scent of pine laced the chilly air, invigorating the night with its pungent fragrance.

Ella snuggled into the curve of Nickoli's side. He pulled the blankets up to her chin and leaned his cheek on the crown of her head. It felt good even if it wasn't real.

The horses rounded the curve, and the lights of the little town greeted them. Thanksgiving decorations were everywhere. Lighted turkeys sat on every street corner, and strings of colored leaves ran from lamppost to lamppost. Ella saw with new eyes how quaint and beautiful her hometown was. Almost every house was an old Victorian with fresh paint to its gingerbread adornments. She had forgotten how the townspeople always decorated their porches for every

occasion to celebrate each new season as it came along.

A nostalgic yearning ached around her heart as she took in the care and time they took to make their homes greet the Thanksgiving holiday. Wreaths of leaves, gourds, and plastic turkeys or sheaves of colored Indian corn topped with bright bows adorned every door. Paper leaves in autumn colors, Pilgrims, and orange pumpkins handmade by children were proudly taped to windows all along the way.

She returned the waves of neighbors she recognized, and her parents expressed greetings to those still shopping along the storefronts and on the sidewalks. A few cars and SUVs passed them, but mostly the streets were quiet. As she greeted old friends and neighbors, she wondered if they noticed the handsome man whose arms were wrapped around her. She knew that it wouldn't take long for the news to get back to Mark that Ella had found someone new. She wondered if he would be jealous. A surge of joy ran through her at the thought of Mark having regrets about jilting her or even getting jealous about her new love.

Satisfied that her plan was working well, Ella settled back into Nickoli's embrace and kissed him for good measure. She felt him stiffen under her touch. He seemed to have sighed, then tightened his arms around her, and kissed her back. She sensed that Nickoli had perceived her thoughts and disapproved of them. He just didn't understand how important it was for her to have her revenge on the man who broke her heart.

By the time they returned home tired and happy, Nickoli had loosened up and laughed over silly jokes her parents and Angeline told him. He was such a dear. She could not have asked for a better friend, and she would always be grateful for him playing the part of her loving fiancé.

As they made their way back to the house through the snow and chilly air, Nickoli took her arm, leaned in close enough that his breath warmed her ear, and whispered, "And now we have the night to share alone in our room."

The excitement of anticipation shot through her. It was thrilling just to think of lying in his arms, maybe even naked. She had not seen Nickoli without his clothes. Curiosity burned along her veins in surging rivers of stirring need. His hand tightened on her arm, and she looked up to see him smiling down at her. The devilish man seemed to guess her every thought. Well, he was about to see a new side of her tonight.

If they were going to pretend to be engaged and in love, what harm could there be in having a little fun? Maybe somewhere in the back of her mind, she had wondered what Nickoli would be like in bed. She knew that he had gone out with women from time to time, and sometimes he stayed overnight with this one and that one. God knows she'd seen the come-on looks from women who came to his piano shop. Oh, she knew that he was handsome, and he had a quiet strength about him that drew women to him, but her heart had been too filled with the hurt of Mark's leaving to think of Nickoli in such a way. Well, maybe it was time to find out what she'd been missing.

Chapter Eight

The pale moonlight was the only light in the room, but it was enough to see Nickoli naked and aroused. Ella tried not to stare but failed as her eyes fixed on him. Standing in the frame of the window, he was etched in moonlight, the embodiment of power and masculine splendor. Why had she never thought of him in a sexual way before? How had she missed the sensual fullness of his lips all those times when he had kissed her? Until now, she had never guessed at the hardness or muscular form of his perfect body. He had always just been her friend, and she had been blind to his masculine attributes—but no longer.

She moved toward him slowly as if she would break the spell if she hurried. Her nipples grew taut and ached for his hands to touch beneath her sweater. The lace of her bra seemed to chafe the tender stalks, making them hard, aroused, and eager for Nickoli's attention. Moisture gathered between her thighs as she drew near. His fragrance of pine, sun, and masculinity radiated from him as she came within his reach. Her breath caught as he stretched out his hand and pulled her into his embrace.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and slid her palms along the smooth contours of his skin with hard muscle moving beneath. The warmth of his breath fell on her throat as he used his lips to trace the column of it. Those sensuous lips traveled the length of her neck, moving down to trace an electric path along the edge of her sweater where it dipped off her shoulder.

Ella stepped back to remove the sweater, but Nickoli clasped her wrists gently in his big hands. "Let me." His baritone voice seemed to fill the room with its rich sound even though he spoke softly.

Forcing herself to stand still, Ella raised her arms and allowed Nickoli to remove her sweater. His hands moved slowly, touching her skin with feathery lightness until he dropped the sweater to the floor. Next, he dipped his fingers beneath the lacy fabric of her bra to rub her already aching nipples. He reached behind her, unfastened her bra, and dropped it to join the sweater on the floor.

With her breasts freed of their confines, Nickoli pinched the excited nipples gently until they jutted out into throbbing points. He then molded her breasts to his liking with his hands. Leaning his head down, he licked first one and then the other peak that throbbed with every beat of her quickening pulse. He placed an arm to her back and leaned her over the strong curve of it, which forced her breasts, swollen with want for his perusal, upward. He lowered his mouth and licked the protruding nipple, then took it into his mouth to suck it, tongue it, and graze it gently with his teeth, sending volts of electric heat to her nether parts. With his other hand, he fingered the other breast, squeezing, flicking, and pinching the jutting nipple gently until the sweet torture made it rigid with excitement.

Ella reached up to run her fingers through his thick, silky hair and delighted in the whispery feel of it as its thick strands slipped through her fingers. Wanting to get off the clothes separating her skin from his, she moaned and lifted her hips toward his hard erection. When she lowered her hands to rid herself of her jeans and panties, Nickoli stopped her by clasping her hands.

"Is for my pleasure. Allow me to do this," he said softly.

His work-roughened hands smoothed her waist before unbuttoning the top button of her jeans. She closed her eyes in breathless anticipation as he ran the zipper down, which made a little whirring sound in the quiet of the room. She stepped out of her jeans and let them gather at her feet. Now all that remained between him and her was a scrap of delicate lace. Without hurrying, he took the edges of her panties and moved them slowly down to the floor, branding her thighs and legs with his lips as he moved the panties downward.

As he moved back up, he explored every inch of her skin with fingers and lips until he reached the apex where her legs joined. He knelt before her and reached up to lay his hands on the triangle

of curls between her legs. A groan escaped him as he used his thumbs to separate the delicate flesh that covered her sexual pearl. His lips teased the hard morsel, which caused her to go weak with pleasure. She had to clasp his shoulders with her hands to maintain an upright position.

The splendid tension overtook her, the intensity of it spiraling tighter and tighter. Beyond her control and dizzy with passion, Ella bucked and moaned her release. Nickoli stood, brought her close to his chest with one arm, slid his other arm under her knees, picked her up, and carried her to the bed. Ella wrapped her arms around his neck, enjoying the feel of his corded muscles beneath her palms.

She had never noticed how exotically handsome he was or how muscular and lean his physique. He was always her friend. Romantic notions about him had not entered her mind. Truth be told, she had not seen him as sexual, powerful, and blindingly beautiful until now. The man who was thrilling every nerve in her body and driving her wild at this moment had held her in his arms and caressed her many times over the years, but it had never occurred to her that he could elicit such passion, such sexual heat.

Illuminated in moonlight, Nickoli stretched out beside her and gathered her up in his arms to comfort her as she swirled back down to Earth from her ecstasy. "Oh my God, I can't believe we just did that," she whispered feeling suddenly embarrassed by her response to his lovemaking. Mark had never put his mouth *down there*. She had read about it in romance novels and wondered what it could be like, but until Nickoli made love to her in this way, she had not experienced such sexual intensity.

Nickoli lifted a stray curl from her face and placed it ever so gently behind her ear. Running his palm down her neck, over her clavicle, and down to the peak of her breast, he then gently rubbed the sensitive crest. With searching eyes that glittered in the pale light, he asked, "Is not to your liking, *dragut mea*?"

"Are you kidding me? I've never experienced anything like that in my life." Ella couldn't quite meet his gaze as embarrassment flooded her thoughts. "I read about it and wondered what it could be like. I didn't think men really wanted to do such things with a woman." She directed her words to his chest rather than peer into his eyes. The heat of embarrassment ran up her neck and face, and she was grateful for the semidarkness.

There was a moment's pause, and she knew that he was wondering why Mark had not pleased her in this erotic way, but he was gentleman enough not to ask. Instead, he chuckled as he slid his arm under her head for her to rest on while he continued to apply his magic touch to her breast.

"Is good to pleasure you, make you wet and ready." His hand moved down to her hip, gently messaging and smoothing her skin along the way. "I want to taste every inch of you."

His erection was hard and thick where it pressed against her belly. Could she accommodate all of him? Would he fill her and stretch her excited flesh with the length and width of such a member? She wanted nothing more than to find out. Her curiosity led her to reach out her hand to touch his length. She marveled at the texture of his erection, which was like steel under thin velvet. The plum-shaped head was spongy yet firm beneath her fingers, with a grainy texture to it. As she clasped it in her hand and rubbed her thumb up and down the wide tip, she heard Nickoli gasp and then groan in obvious pleasure.

There was never this leisurely exploration with Mark. He barely touched her before sex, and often, she had no opportunity to become wet and excited before he pierced her still-dry vagina, making sex painful and unpleasant.

Nickoli's fingers moved between her legs. With his palm messaging her mons, he spread her nether lips and found her woman's pearl. Slowly his fingers circled her clitoris, which made it hard and rigid with excitement all over again.

His deep voice filled with the roughness of passion, Nickoli made his plea. "Let me make love to

you. Let me enter you and fill you, *comoara mea*, to give us both what we need.”

Unable to speak, Ella nodded her head, giving her consent. She had not known a lover’s tender touch or sex for two years. Torn between excited anticipation and fear, Ella rolled to her back and, drawing up her legs, spread them wide in an invitation.

Nickoli moved over her and positioned himself between her legs, his erection hard and insistent at the edge of her opening. He did not enter her though she lifted her hips up in an attempt to impale herself on his aroused shaft.

First, he leaned over her and kissed her, gently, tenderly, and with thorough persistence, as if it were the last kiss he would ever give and, therefore, of the utmost importance. He spoke to her with that kiss. She knew then that he felt true passion for her, not as the friend, but as the woman.

It scared her.

Thoughts of Mark raced across her mind. What if Mark wanted her back? If she became emotionally entangled with Nickoli, it would complicate things with Mark.

As if he felt her tense beneath him, he straightened his arms to move back and gaze at her. “What is wrong?” His voice was heavy with desire, his breath rapid, and yet, he halted.

“Nothing. Really, it’s nothing.” Her words sounded shaky and uncertain to her ears.

“You think of him *now*?” Even though his voice was low, just above a whisper, the edge of his words was sharp enough to draw blood. He didn’t wait for her to answer. He stood up, quickly put on his pants and a shirt, and left the room.

Ella, still breathing raggedly from the anticipation of Nickoli’s lovemaking, drew her knees up to her chest and hugged them with her arms. The room had become oppressively silent. Somewhere deep within her, an empty ache grew until it filled every place inside her and stole her breath away. She never should have talked Nickoli into coming home with her for the holidays and playing this pitiful charade. She had done the one thing she never intended to do—she had hurt Nickoli. Not only had she hurt him, but she had done it when he was about to make love to her in earnest.

She wanted to apologize to him, but what would she say? There wasn’t a Miss Manners etiquette rule for this.

As if it wasn’t awful enough that Mark had dumped her at the altar for the whole town to see her made ridiculous, now she had botched her relationship with her dearest friend as well. Nickoli would not forgive this of her.

Chapter Nine

Nickoli leaned his back against the door and tried to calm his raging desire. He needed air, but he couldn't go outside in his bare feet, and he sure as hell wasn't going back in that room to get his shoes. If he went back now, he would have to bury himself in her and make love to her until he made her forget there was ever a man before him. That wasn't how he wanted her.

All these years, he had secretly loved her believing that patience and care would heal her from this other man's terrible rejection. But all that Ella could see was the hurt and pain of Mark's betrayal. God, how he wanted to put his hands around Mark's throat and choke him. Better yet, he wanted to pick a fight and beat him senseless. Nickoli pushed off the doorframe and headed downstairs toward the kitchen. Maybe a cool drink of water would help him think more clearly.

A dim light illuminated the kitchen from a lamp over the breakfast nook, and, to Nickoli's surprise and dismay, Ella's father sat at the table eating a sandwich and drinking a cup of cocoa. He glanced up when Nickoli entered the room and seemed to take in Nickoli's disheveled appearance and bare feet.

"Either you've come to fetch ice water for you and Ella or you've run across a snag in the bedroom." The older man smiled crookedly. "My guess is that it's the latter of the two." He patted the top of the wooden table. "Come on over here, son, and let me make you a sandwich and some hot chocolate, and we'll have us a little talk."

"Oh, no, thank you, sir, I'm not hungry. I just came for a drink of water." He made his way to the table and sat heavily in the chair across from Ella's father.

"You have a hungry look in your eyes whatever your stomach might be feeling." Ella's father got up and went to the refrigerator, pulled out a pitcher of filtered water, took a glass from the cabinet, filled it, and brought the glass to Nickoli after replacing the pitcher in the refrigerator. Apparently not satisfied that Nickoli had nothing to eat, he turned to the kitchen counter and brought the bowl of fruit that was resting on the counter back to the table and placed it in front of Nickoli. "Have some fruit?"

Nickoli shook his head but did not lift his eyes. Instead, he stared at the table, afraid Mr. Dubois would guess his deceit.

"You want to talk about it?" Ella's father asked as he reseated himself across from Nickoli and continued to eat his sandwich.

He knew he could not deny he was upset. There was only so much deception his conscience could allow. "Is a personal matter, Mr. Dubois. I must keep it private."

"Please, call me Jim, Nick. We don't go by a lot of formality around here. Besides, you're practically family now." He reached over the table, placed a hand on Nickoli's shoulder, and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I've been around the block a time or two, Nick, and I know when someone's keeping a secret." He pulled back his hand, took a sip of cocoa, and watched Nickoli for a moment.

Nickoli felt the elder man's gaze searching for the truth. He wanted to tell Ella's father what was really bothering him, but he would not betray Ella's trust in him to keep their secret. Her trust was hard to win, and he would not lose it. He lifted his gaze to make eye contact with Mr. Dubois. "I am at a loss what to say, sir. I cannot confide something of such a private nature to Ella's father."

"I can see you're troubled, son, and I want to help if I can. Ella is my daughter, and I love her more than my life." He took a breath, paused, and tilted his head as he pierced Nickoli's thoughts with his eyes. "I know, without a doubt, that she is at the bottom of those sorrowful looks. I can see how much she cares for you, but I fear she just can't let go of that terrible day when that bastard left her at the altar."

Nickoli lifted his head and stared at Mr. Dubois with undivided attention. A knot formed in his throat. Did her father know they were pretending to be engaged? "I would never do such a thing to

her.”

Jim Dubois chuckled and shook his head. “I know you wouldn’t. It’s obvious how much you love her. A blind man could see it. The problem isn’t you, Nick. It’s my daughter.”

“Please, Mr. Dubois, I wouldn’t want you to think . . .”

“Jim. Please call me Jim. And I don’t have to think, Nick. I know it’s Ella.” He smiled at Nickoli. “You don’t have to defend her, Nick. I understand her well. She may be in love with you and ready to commit to marriage, but she still has some baggage to let go of—namely, Mark McKinnett.”

Nickoli sucked in a breath. He *knew*. What was he to do? He and Jim were in agreement about Ella and her need to let go of the past, the bitterness, and the self-doubt it had created in her. Before him sat the one person who might be able to help him.

He struggled between his promise to keep their secret or to confide in her father and break that promise. Finally, he decided to seek Jim’s help because maybe, just maybe, he could find the hope he so sorely needed and find the way to win Ella’s heart. He knew that if Ella found that he had confessed the truth to her father, she might never trust him again. It was risky. He could lose her. He could lose everything he yearned for if she learned of his compromise.

“I love her, Jim. She is *inima mea*, my heart.”

“Of that, I have no doubt. I can see it in your eyes, and when you’re with her, you watch her every move like a sailor out at sea for months getting his first look at land.” Jim stood and took his cup and plate to the sink and placed them inside. He kept his back to Nickoli for a few moments, then turned and looked him straight in the eye. “So, why don’t you go ahead and tell me the truth, son, and we’ll see if we can work out a solution to help you.”

He returned to the table, folded his arms on the smooth surface, and waited for Nickoli to tell him what the truth was.

“Ella does not love me.” Somehow, it felt good to tell at least that part of the truth. “There is no room in her heart for me. This old love and what he did to her, the humiliation of it, takes up all the space there.”

Jim moved his chair closer to Nickoli and put a fatherly arm around his shoulders. “If I’m any judge of character, and I am”—the elder man chuckled—“I know that you’re a good man. You’re the man I would have chosen for her.” He paused a moment before he leaned back in his chair a little and gazed at Nickoli with a smile on his face. “And I think she loves you, too. She must, or she wouldn’t have agreed to marry you.”

“Well, sir . . .”

“You don’t have to tell me, Nick. The two of you aren’t really engaged, are you? I didn’t see a ring on her finger. The two of you probably forgot about that little detail.”

“I am so sorry. I did not want to deceive you.” Nickoli swallowed hard. “I want to marry her. I want to share my life with her and have children, lots of children, and grow old together, but I know what her answer would be if I asked her. She is not ready to give up on this man who broke her heart.” He could not help clenching his fists in his lap or being angry with this other man for causing such pain to the woman he loved beyond reason.

“I like you, Nick. And I’m going to help you. Don’t worry. I’m going to keep your little secret. It’ll be hard keeping it from Charlene. I don’t like keeping things from my wife, but she’ll understand later when it all works out.” He patted Nickoli’s clenched hands and smiled. “Tomorrow is going to be a busy day what with Thanksgiving coming up the next day. The Dubois women are going to take over the kitchen all day and maybe into the night.” He leaned back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest, and grinned. “The Dubois men take a trip into the forest to pick out a Christmas tree. We always put it up the day after Thanksgiving—kind of a tradition, you might say. We’ll have the whole day for plotting and planning about how to proceed.”

“What about Ella’s brothers, Rudy and Leo? They must not know our secret. She would not like

them to know she has deceived them.” Nickoli felt little snakes of anxiety twisting and turning inside. “What if they want to tease her and tell her that I asked for their help?”

“That’s not the way it works with the Dubois men. We keep some things to ourselves. How do you think they ended up marrying those two wonderful women? We all helped out. One man alone is defenseless against a smart woman. You have to have some help.” Nickoli joined in when Jim laughed, mostly because he knew it to be true.

Because of Jim’s good counsel, Nickoli began to feel better about his chances of winning Ella’s heart. “Thank you, Jim. I feel there is hope now.” He got up from his chair, shook hands with Jim, carried his glass to the sink, and returned to the bedroom he shared with Ella.

Because the room was in semidarkness, he had to let his eyes adjust before glancing at the bed. His heart turned over in his chest when he saw Ella curled up like a little girl on a distant corner of the bed. She was still naked. A rosy-tipped breast peeked out from under the covers. The sight of it made Nickoli grow hard. The raging desire returned, and he wanted to finish what they had started earlier. Calming himself, he removed his clothes and slipped under the covers. The situation called for the utmost control if his plan was going to work.

It was her heart he wanted, not just sex. Carefully, so as not to awaken her, he lay down close beside her with her back to his front. With stealth, he slid one arm under her head to pillow it and wrapped the other around her waist. He pulled her close, cupping her bottom with his thighs, and snuggled her tightly against him with hope that she wouldn’t awaken before he could subdue his erection that pressed against her back. For now, he only wanted to feel her in his arms. In his mind, he said a silent prayer that her family could help him find a way to heal her heart and open it to his love.

Somewhere in the night, blessed sleep overtook him and brought him peace.

Chapter Ten

Fingers of sunny light pried into Ella's eyes and woke her to the bright day. The temperature had dropped during the night, and she snuggled against the warmth behind her. An arm came up to pull her in tighter to the source of warmth.

Nickoli.

When had he returned? Where had he gone? Was he still angry with her? The heat of his body radiated to her, beckoned her to move closer still.

As she recollected the events of the previous night, embarrassment rippled through her chest. What an awful time for her to think of Mark. Nickoli's hard words echoed in her mind and made her cringe. How could she have thought of Mark at such an inconvenient time, right when Nickoli was about to make love to her?

Worse than her own digression, why did Nickoli have to be so sensitive about Mark? Every time the subject of Mark came up, he became either angry or silent. Why couldn't he understand what a devastating effect Mark's rejection had on her? She hated that she was even thinking of Mark right now when she could be enticing Nickoli to make love to her. Sex made her forget everything else. Forgetting, even for just an hour, was a wonderful reprieve.

Last night with Nickoli had been wonderful. She would have never guessed what a splendid lover he was. The very remembrance of what he did to her made moisture gather between her legs. She had ruined it, though. If only she could get Mark out of her head, out of her heart.

Without realizing what she was about to do, Ella turned so that her front pressed along Nickoli's front. She nestled beneath his chin and breathed in his masculine scent. She felt his hand gather her hair into a rope and brought her head to rest on his chest.

"I'm sorry about last night, Nickoli. I never meant to hurt you or upset you. Surely you know that." After wiggling her arms beneath his, she then moved them up and laid her palms against the warm skin of his broad back. She loved the feel of his muscular body beneath her hands.

He ran his hand down the length of her torso, sending rivers of fire along the path he took. "I know you didn't mean to make me angry. We are pretending, yes? No need to be angry or jealous."

Pretending.

"Where did you go? I fell asleep waiting for you to come back." She had almost forgotten that they were only creating the illusion of being in love. It had been her idea. Even so, knowing that it was all an act seemed to create a sharp little pain in her chest.

"I went to the kitchen." He massaged her hip and bottom, which caused her to arch toward him. "Your father was there."

"Damn. Did he ask what you were doing there? I mean, did you tell him we had a fight? Didn't he wonder why you weren't in my room with me? This might have ruined everything."

She felt him chuckle. "Is all right. He thinks we had a lovers' quarrel and gave me advice to help." He glanced down at her with his black, glittering eyes, and their corners crinkled with his smile.

Beneath the covers, he moved his hand over her bottom and pulled her hips to his. She felt the hard length of his erection pressing into her belly. It was becoming difficult to think. Her body was beginning to surge with heat.

Nickoli groaned, and she peered up to see him close his eyes. His angular face was dark with what she could only assume was passion. His shiny raven hair was sleep-tousled, giving him a sexy but vulnerable appearance.

"What did he say?" The tension in her was building, coiling up in heated waves as his strong fingers massaged her hip and moved slowly upward. She kissed the soft black hair sprinkled across his chest and licked his flat nipples, which elicited another groan of pleasure from him.

His hand moved up her back, then came up beneath her breast to force it upward, molding it. Then he brushed pink stalk, exciting it with his thumb. A moan escaped her before he covered her mouth with his and slowly assaulted her tongue. After a few moments, he withdrew from his kiss and spoke.

“We talked a long time. . . . I like him. . . . He loves you so much. . . . He is funny, too.” His words came out halting and breathless. He moved away from her mouth to lick her sensitive nipple, then turned her on her back to capture the other nipple in his mouth and sucked hard on it. Gently, he grazed his teeth on it, which sent streaks of excitement to her core.

Her breath came rapidly as she reached down to touch him. She ran her fingers along the length of him. His thick erection grew even harder under her touch, and he rocked into her hand. She felt as if the whole room was heating up.

Ella heard the sounds of floors creaking and doors opening and closing. A soft knock at the door made her tense.

“Hey, you two, breakfast is almost ready,” Angeline called in muffled tones from the other side of the door. Ella heard her laugh. “You better not be doing anything nasty in there.” Then her footsteps moved away, along with her laughter.

Nickoli collapsed beside her and chuckled. “Perhaps tonight when we are alone again, we can start over, *comoara mea*.”

Smells of bacon frying and fresh coffee wafted up from below, causing Ella’s stomach to growl. She sighed and fell back on the bed with her arms spread out. Nickoli leaned over her and ran the back of his hand down the length of her body, which made her nerves ripple with heat in its path.

She reached up and held his face in her hands. “So, you forgive me for making you upset last night?”

A broad smile lit his face. His dark eyes twinkled with mischief. “I make you pay later tonight.” He laughed softly.

A loud knock at the door interrupted them. “Hey! Get up out of that bed. We’ve got a lot to do today.” This time it was Rudy.

“I guess we better get down there before Leo comes. He’ll just skip the formalities and come in to drag us out of bed,” Ella said, and laughed.

* * * *

Breakfast took place in the dining room since the kitchen wasn’t big enough to accommodate everyone. The food, prepared by Ella’s mother and father, was delicious. Pancakes, bacon, and eggs—just like Saturday mornings used to be when she was a kid growing up in this house. Now the place was filled with the next generation of kids, wild kids, and with the noise of everyone trying to talk at once.

“What are we doing today?” Nickoli asked as he leaned back in his chair and, having consumed seconds of everything, pushed his plate away from him.

Leo pulled out a chair and sat down beside Nickoli with a cup of coffee in his hand. “Since Thanksgiving is tomorrow, we menfolk are going to go to the forest along with the kids and find a Christmas tree while all the Dubois women get in the kitchen to start cooking for the big day.”

“A Christmas tree?” Nickoli had a surprised expression on his face. “Is only Thanksgiving, yes?”

Leo placed a hand on Nickoli’s shoulder and gave him a pained look. “It’s all on account of the girl you’re going to marry.” Without encouragement, he grinned and began his explanation. “Ella loves Christmas, and as you probably already know, she doesn’t have a lot of patience. She’s always been in such a hurry for Christmas that we were forced to go out and get a tree so she could start decorating it as soon as Thanksgiving dinner was over. It used to ruin our chances of seeing the

damn football game.”

“Watch that mouth, mister,” Miranda said as she passed through the dining room with their baby in her arms.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied contritely, then winked at Nickoli. “Marriage and kids will change your life. Are you sure you’re up for it, buddy?”

Ella, who had been listening with silent patience to her brother’s prattling, cuddled up to Nickoli. She put her arm around his shoulders and grinned at her brother. “Of course he is. Having a little trouble wearing the pants in your family, brother?”

Leo glanced over at Nickoli with a sympathetic look. “You got your work cut out for you, Nick. Sissy here is a handful.”

“Is work I enjoy,” Nickoli replied without skipping a beat. A bubble of joy lifted up in Ella’s chest and came out in a little giggle because she knew he spoke sincerely.

Charlene Dubois came into the dining room and peered at the three still sitting around the table. Her blue eyes fixed on Ella. “Ella, honey, leave the men get about their day. We have pies and cakes to get in the oven. We have a whole day of cooking ahead of us. The turkey hasn’t thawed yet, either.” She turned and started back toward the kitchen and the sound of pots and pans rattling. “I wish I had just bought the mincemeat instead of making it myself. Later today, I would love to see the gown you brought to wear to the Thanksgiving dance. It will be so exciting for you to see your old friends and introduce Nick to them.” Her voice faded as she made it back to the kitchen.

“If she comes back, she won’t be that polite,” Ella said. Leo snickered. “I better be on my way before she thinks I’ve abandoned ship.” Ella rose from the chair and leaned over to give Nickoli a kiss on his stubbly cheek, then whispered in his ear, “See you later, Nick. Maybe we can pick up where we left off this morning.”

Before she could leave, he pulled her into his lap, where he delivered a searing kiss. Close to her ear, he whispered, “I won’t forget.” Then he kissed her again.

Leo chuckled as he got up from his chair and shoved it back under the table with a high-pitched scraping sound. “Oh, for Pete’s sake, this could go on forever. Break it up, you two. There’ll be time enough for that later.”

Ella felt light and giddy. Pretending to be engaged to Nickoli was just downright fun. She never would have thought he could be this sexy. She wanted to eat him up. Maybe later, she would.

Chapter Eleven

The snow had stopped. A thick blanket of white covered everything and quieted the world around them as the little group made their way into the pine forest. Rudy's oldest son, Kevin, who was seven years old, and his five-year-old daughter pulled a large sled, and Leo's six-year-old daughter, Lily, rode on the sleigh. Leo's baby boy, David, was too young to join them and, therefore, was safe at home in his mother's care.

The crisp, cold air made Nickoli's face sting, and his hands, though encased in thick wool gloves, were starting to go numb. It reminded him of Romania.

It had been a long time since he had allowed himself to remember home or his young wife, Marilena. He and Marilena were both sixteen when they fell in love and married. They were young and foolish but filled with enthusiasm and hope. With no money or connections, Nickoli had no chance at going to college, and music was not a practical vocation. To get approval from her family to marry Marilena, he had to have a means of making a living.

So, Nickoli went to work in his father's music shop and learned from his father the art and craft of repairing instruments. Gratitude filled his heart for his father. Nickoli had always loved the pianos, admired their beauty and the sounds they made. While his father worked on violins, violas, and cellos, Nickoli chose to devote his efforts to the pianos. Vesa and Son soon became a name to be proud of, and Nickoli felt confident enough to ask Marilena's family for her hand.

They had not been married long, less than a year, when Marilena became pregnant. She was so young and so small. Nickoli secretly worried about his wife and her ability to carry their baby. The doctor had told him it would be difficult and that Nickoli's young wife would need to be on bed rest until she delivered.

But Marilena didn't listen. She became bored reading books and playing checkers with Nickoli. She told him she wanted to be "normal." Nickoli came home from work to find Marilena on the floor bleeding. He could tell that she had been up cleaning the house and washing clothes. With tears and remorse in her eyes, she told him she was sorry. She hadn't meant to hurt their baby.

Nickoli looked at all the blood, and his heart squeezed tight with fear. He picked her up and carried her to the bed. No matter how he tried to clean her up, more blood came. He asked the neighbor to fetch the doctor, and then he prayed.

The doctor came as quickly as he could, but neither Marilena nor their baby could be saved. Nickoli grieved for months and months. With his heart and spirit broken, Nickoli believed he would never fall in love again. Before long, Nickoli and his father journeyed to the United States. It hurt him to leave the place where his mother, Marilena, and their baby were buried. It felt as though he was abandoning them and their memory. His father was right, though. It was best to leave the sorrow behind and create a life in a new place where hope and prosperity seemed to fall from the heavens.

Years later, after his father died, he was grateful that he had come to America because here is where he got his life back. It took everything they had for Nickoli and his father to get their music shop started. Business was good, and with hard work and determination, they became well established. Nickoli found the old Victorian farmhouse and bought it. With some help from his father, he began to work on repairing it.

Then one day, the beautiful woman with copper hair and green eyes came into his shop, and he felt his heart begin to beat again. Even when she became engaged to a man back in her hometown in Maine, he felt happy for her that she had found such a love. He thought it was possible to love her at a distance, to be her friend and never ask for more.

She was funny and loving. They talked about everything and confided in one another. Nickoli even told her about Marilena and about how devastated he was when he lost her. Ella helped him

think about the future with optimism and joy.

And then Mark left her standing at the altar on what should have been the happiest day of her life. Her father made the announcement to everyone gathered there as Ella left, still in her wedding gown, to pack her things and return to Virginia with Nickoli. She had not been the same since.

But in these last few days, Nickoli had seen a change in her. She had opened up to him, responded to his kisses. It was as if she were seeing him, really seeing him, for the first time. Ella seemed so willing and eager when he began to make love to her. Surely, this was not a pretense. He felt certain that she had real feelings for him. Perhaps, at last, she had let go of Mark and the dark bitterness she felt at what he had done to her.

Maybe now there was a chance for him. It had been a long time since Nickoli had felt a woman's arms around him and longer still since he had made love to a woman who responded to him with such tenderness. He wanted Ella, God how he wanted her.

Suddenly, a snowball hit him right in the chest. Rudy laughed. "Hey, Nick, get your head out of the clouds. Help us get this tree down."

The children stood in a circle around a beautiful pine tree and jumped up and down in glee. "This is the one. This is the one."

Jim Dubois and his two sons glanced at Nickoli. "What do you think, Nick? Is it too big for the living room?"

Smiling as he dusted the snow off his chest, Nickoli nodded. "We could cut off a foot or two from bottom, yes?"

"And about ten feet from the top." Leo laughed.

"Come on, kids, this one is too tall." Rudy led them to another tree about twenty feet from the first. "What about this one? It's a nice spruce." He leaned toward it and inhaled deeply. "Smells wonderful."

Everyone moved to where Rudy stood and, after a unanimous vote, sawed the tree and tied a rope to it for easy pulling to get it home. The whole scene was heartwarming to Nickoli. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt a part of a family. Joy bubbled up inside him, and he allowed himself to think what it would be like to be a part of this family.

The kids were seated on the sled, and Rudy pulled them, singing songs about turkeys and Thanksgiving while Leo carried the smallest one on his shoulders. Jim and Nickoli grabbed the rope tied to the tree, and they all headed homeward. They trudged back to the barn and stood the tree up against an empty stall while the children ran into the house laughing and joking about the tree. Charlene, her two daughters, and her two daughters-in-law were sure to greet them with cookies and hot cocoa.

Nickoli was about to return to the house looking forward to kissing Ella, now that he was free to do so, when he noticed that Jim and his sons seemed reluctant to leave the confines of the barn. Instead, they each took a seat, Leo on the rail of the stall, Rudy on an overturned barrel, and Jim on the feed bin.

"Come on over here, Nick, and have a seat. Me and the boys would like to talk with you just a bit," Jim said as he motioned for Nickoli to join him on the feed bin beside him.

Nickoli's heart clenched. Were they going to tell him that they didn't want him to marry Ella? Perhaps his broken English and the fact that he was a Romanian had led them to believe he was not a good choice for her. With his heart racing in his chest, Nickoli joined Jim on the feed bin.

"You are upset that I want to marry Ella?" He wanted to ask it right away and find out what they really thought of him. He held his breath waiting for the answer and stiffened his resolve in case they told him what he was afraid to hear.

The three men laughed, and Jim put his arm around Nickoli's shoulders. "No, son, we're here to talk about how we can help you."

Nickoli glanced around at the three men. Inside, he tensed. “What do you mean?” He asked it, knowing full well what Jim had meant, but he was leery of Rudy and Leo.

“Relax,” Jim said and patted him on the back. “I told the boys you had a problem we might be able to help you with, but I didn’t tell them what it is. I needed your permission to do that. May I explain it to them?”

Nickoli peered into the eyes of Leo and Rudy trying to decipher their feelings toward him. Their eyes were warm, their smiles friendly. He was certain they had good intentions and nodded his consent.

After Jim explained the truth about Ella and Nickoli’s engagement, he asked Leo and Rudy to help Nickoli win Ella’s heart.

Leo was the first to speak. “I think Ella already loves you, Nick. The way she is around you, all wide-eyed and attentive, can’t be an act.”

“I have to agree with Leo, Nick. There’s no way that Ella could pretend to care about you like that,” Rudy agreed and added, “She’s not that good an actress anyway.” He peered into Nickoli’s eyes. “We know she cares for you deeply. She could see it if she could ever stop protecting herself from another heartbreak.”

“So, how can we help Nick do that?” Jim asked them.

“Maybe flowers,” Leo suggested.

“Oh, come on, that’s too common,” Rudy said. “I think it should be a present—something small, tasteful but meaningful.”

“That sounds good,” Jim said. He turned to Nickoli. “What do you think, son?”

“It sounds good—but what can I give her that would be meaningful?” Nickoli searched his brain trying to think what it could be.

“It should be something she can show off to her friends that would say you love her, like jewelry perhaps.” Jim glanced at Nickoli. “She did mention that there would be a dance on the night of Thanksgiving, didn’t she?”

“Yes. She told me to be sure and pack my tuxedo to wear to a formal dance.” An idea formed in Nickoli’s mind as he thought about Jim’s suggestion. “I believe I have the answer.” Nickoli glanced at Leo. “I must go to town to a jewelry store, and a florist, too. I will buy her a present, and I will get a corsage of flowers to wear to the dance tomorrow night.”

“Great. We’ll go to town after lunch and take care of it,” Jim said. “We’ll just say we’re going to town for a little male bonding. We should all buy our ladies a corsage anyway. The dance is formal, so it would be just like taking them to a prom.”

“A prom?” Nickoli asked.

“Yeah, like those high school dances where the guys wear a dinner jacket or a tux and the girls wear beautiful gowns with little purses and shoes to match.” Rudy smiled as if reminiscing.

Leo leaped down from the stall rail. His face took on a serious expression that made a knot form in Nickoli’s gut. “There’s something you ought to know, Nick.”

Nickoli stood with an apprehensive niggerle pulling on his nerves. “What?”

“Mark and his wife are coming to the dance.”

Jim and Rudy stood, joining Leo and Nickoli. A cloud drifted over Nickoli’s heart. “What do you think will happen? Will it hurt Ella to see him?”

“I don’t know, Nick.” Jim was at least being honest. “Just be prepared for whatever occurs.”

“We’ll be there for you, buddy,” Leo added.

“The family is behind you. We all want to see Ella happy again, and we all agree that you’re the man who can bring her that joy.” Rudy smiled at Nick and patted him on the back.

Nickoli wished that he could feel secure in that. He, after all, wasn’t that sure that he had captured Ella’s affection compared to her great love for Mark. Resentment nibbled at his gut.

Because of her previous misadventure with love and because of the way that Mark mistreated her trust and affection, his chances of winning her had lessened by significant measure.

What warmed his heart now was the positive way her family encouraged him in his attempt to win Ella's heart. The warmth and friendliness they demonstrated in response to his desire for Ella made him feel as if they were on his side. They were like family. Nickoli hadn't felt a part of a family in years. It felt so good. He prayed that he wouldn't have to give them up. As they walked toward the house, Nick hoped he wouldn't lose the one person who was most important to him—Ella.

Chapter Twelve

While the men were out bonding, the women were baking. After it was done and the turkey was ready and waiting in the refrigerator for morning, the ladies gathered around the fire in the den with hot tea and gingerbread. The older children had gobbled up their cookies and cocoa and returned outside to play in the snow with Angeline helping them build a snow woman. The younger ones were napping upstairs with their monitors on.

"Nick is such a dear," Ella's mother said. "I couldn't have asked for a better man for you, Ella."

Miranda giggled. "Not to mention he's quite a hunk. My God, you must look forward to nights in the sack with him."

Ella gasped and almost spewed her tea. "Good grief, Miranda, you're going embarrass me to death."

"Oh, I doubt that, Ella," Jane said. "I think she's right on target. You're probably itching for him to get back right now so the two of you can race upstairs, lock the door, and rip each other's clothes off."

Ella felt her face flush and knew they were just trying to mess with her. The truth was that she'd been thinking about Nick all day. She wanted to finish what they had started this morning before they were interrupted. Her pulse quickened just remembering the things Nick did to her when they were alone together.

The sound of the back door opening and feet stamping off snow in the utility room echoed into the den. Ella's heart quickened as she heard Nickoli's voice. He said something she couldn't quite make out, and they were all laughing while they traded their boots for shoes.

Nickoli was back.

She heard them as they stopped in the kitchen to get some hot chocolate and cookies before entering the den and joining the women.

Nickoli's tall form entered the room, and Ella almost gasped audibly when he threw her a brilliant smile. His dark, striking looks were gorgeous, but it was the warmth in his eyes when he looked at her that took her breath away. He approached her and settled a hip on the arm of her chair. Then he leaned over her and kissed the crown of her head. She reached up and caressed his cheek. It seemed to her that the women in the room sighed in unison as each of them witnessed the tender display.

Ella laid her hand on Nickoli's thigh, and Nickoli engulfed it with his own. She felt the heat rise in her core as a silent communication seemed to run between them that promised of something more intimate later.

They shared their morning experiences for a while, then called in the children for lunch. Nickoli helped Angeline set the table and showed her how to fold napkins so that they looked like origami birds. Everyone was astonished to see his and Angeline's creative napkin folding.

As they sat enjoying lunch and talking, sometimes all at once, Ella slipped her hand under the table and laid her palm on Nickoli's thigh. A thrill coursed through her when she heard his breath hitch and he covered her hand with his own. She wanted to pull him from the dining room, take him out to the dark and private confines of the barn, and have her way with him. It was difficult to feign composure outwardly when, on the inside, she was a boiling mass of sexual need.

When lunch was almost finished, Jim announced that he and the boys, including Nickoli, were going into town as soon as they cleared the table to take care of a few important matters. After dodging all the feminine questions following his announcement and helping to clean up and put the dishes in the dishwasher, the menfolk put their boots back on, donned their heavy coats, hopped in the Land Rover, and headed toward town.

Ella's mother stood at the kitchen window watching the yellow Land Rover disappear down the

snowy drive. Jane, Miranda, and Ella stood behind her, all of whom were staring in speechless wonder.

“Well, isn’t that the strangest thing?” Ella’s mother spoke in a whisper. The other ladies nodded their heads in agreement. Ella wondered what on earth the men could be up to.

When the Dubois men and Nickoli returned a couple hours later, they were carrying little boxes they placed in the refrigerator and warned the women not to look inside them or they would ruin the surprise. Even more strange, the men all left and went to the barn acting secretive and excited. They stayed in the barn for almost an hour and acted strangely for the rest of the day.

Without complaint, the men helped the women with all the last-minute preparations for the following day and entertained the children to keep them out of everybody’s hair until time for dinner.

By the time dinner was finished, Ella was exhausted. While she stood at the sink, Nickoli came up behind her and placed his hands on her upper arms to draw her close. He bent his head toward hers and spoke softly in her ear, which sent a myriad of little sparks down her neck.

“Let us go to our room now. I want to draw a hot bath for you and message your muscles. You look so tired, *comoara mea*.”

* * * *

Never had she felt more relaxed than she did soaking in the tub of steamy scented water with Nickoli bathing her ever so attentively. He lathered his hands with her spicy poppy-fragranced soap and slid them down her body. After washing her arms and legs with slow and thorough applications of bubbly soap, he then gave her chest and abdomen his full attention.

He massaged her breasts with his slippery hands and rubbed her nipples until rivers of sexual heat coursed down to her womb, then moved lower. His hands paid homage to her abdomen, then moved lower still over her mound and into her heated nether lips. With one hand squeezing her nipple, his other hand toyed with her clitoris, making little circles around it as he probed her opening with a finger. Her body clenched automatically on his digit as he moved it in and out of her vagina. He applied pressure to her G-spot, which sent heavy excitement into her womb.

Heat coiled and burned inside her. A moan escaped her as he bent over the tub, took her other nipple in his mouth, and began to suck. A groan escaped him. “You are so beautiful, *inima mea*. I want you so badly.”

Ella ran her wet hands through his hair feeling the thick, silky strands run through her fingers. “What does that mean—what you just said?” She sucked in a breath as he lifted his head to nip gently at the column of her throat.

“It means ‘my heart.’”

“And the other words you say, como-something?”

“*Comoara mea*?”

She nodded her head, unable to speak for the intensity building in her core. The release was near.

“It means ‘my darling.’” His reply was breathless.

When she laid her palm against his chest, she felt his heart beating rapidly. Then the release took her away on a fiery rocket that made her buck and slop water over the sides of the tub. As she rode his hand and gazed into his eyes, her body clenched in its climax, then settled back into the warm water of her bath.

Still gazing into his dark eyes, she drew his head down with her hand and kissed him before she spoke again. “You have said these words to me all of these years. Have you had feelings for me all this time then?”

“I have loved you since the day we met in my little shop.” He kissed her back, slow and sensual.

Ella pulled herself up and rested her arms on the sides of the deep claw-foot tub. “Why didn’t you say something?”

Nickoli stood and began removing his clothing. “It was too late. You were engaged to be married.”

She stood, sloshing water over the sides of the tub. Nickoli turned back to her, grabbed a towel from the folded stack on the table, and dried her. He took great care to meticulously dry every part of her body. Ella was silent as she took in what he had just told her. All this time when she had thought of him as her friend, he had secretly loved her. It was hard to imagine the restraint and heartache he must have felt.

Nickoli finished drying her and kissed her sweetly before removing the last of his clothes. Peering over at him as he entered the shower, his magnificent body now blurred behind glass doors, she said in a whisper, “I wish I had known.”

She knew he didn’t hear her as he turned on the water and steam filled the room. She walked out of the bathroom and crawled into the comforting warmth of the bed without bothering to put on a nightgown.

* * * *

Nickoli finished his shower, toweled off, and entered the bedroom to find Ella curled up in the bed asleep. Carefully, he lifted the covers and slid in beside her. He couldn’t resist pulling her to him and touching her. She uncoiled like a cat stretching as he played with her nipples that hardened into jutting stalks in his hands.

She turned to him, moved closer, and began to smooth her hand over his hip, then down to his groin, where she found and seized his hardened length. Nickoli gasped as she ran her hand up and down his erection, teasing and taunting his heated flesh until it was almost painful.

A groan escaped him as she moved downward and took him into her mouth. She licked and sucked, pulling the heat up and up. He rocked to her rhythm as she clasped his heavy length in her hand and moved up and down while her mouth sucked and licked the head. If he let her continue, he was going to ejaculate, and that was not his plan. He wanted to feel his sex squeezed tight inside her. The pleasure of making love to her, feeling her climax in his arms, and pleasing her was all he had wanted for a very long time.

He pulled her up so that he could kiss her. Breathing in her spicy scent, he fondled her breasts, then slid his hand into her moist cleft, where he found her feminine nub. Nickoli teased her clitoris with his fingers until it became hard, causing her breath to come in short gasps.

As she moved closer to her climax, she began to moan. Nickoli kissed her, covering her mouth with his and taking in her sounds as she began to buck with her climax. Holding her tightly to him, he kept her in his embrace as she drifted back into herself. She snaked her arms around his neck and pressed her firm breasts to his heated flesh. The hardened stalks of her nipples scraped along his chest, creating hot paths of lust and want inside him.

He turned her to her back and positioned himself between her thighs. He held her gaze with his eyes. Without her consent, he would not enter her body. Despite his erection, hard, aching, and heavy with need, he waited for her permission.

Joy spread through him like a blessed light when Ella smiled her consent. Nickoli eased his length into her inch by inch, careful not to hurt her. Sweat broke out on his brow with his patient attempt to maintain control. At intervals, he stopped to kiss her, to smooth her hair from her face, or to speak tender words to her until he had sheathed his sex within her tightening vessel.

This was his special moment, the time that he had prayed would come but had believed never

would. His heart ran rampantly beneath his ribs, pumping his blood in scorching rivers to every part of his body until it came to his erection, which flamed with sensitivity at her every move.

Her hips rose toward him. She wanted to take him in deeper, as she tightened around him like a warm glove. He moved over her, bracing himself with his arms on either side of her to keep his weight from off her. Her hands smoothed the tense muscles of his back, then moved down to massage his buttocks as he moved with a slow rhythm in and out of her.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, she impaled herself on his length even farther until he felt himself deep within, touching her G-spot with every downward stroke. Her excited moans encouraged him to pick up the pace. Pulling back until he was almost out of her, he then pushed quickly forward all the way into her before withdrawing and then plunging deep within her again. He felt the hard crown of her cervix as he drove in deeply with the tip of his erection.

She squirmed, lifting her hips until their pubic hair matted together, making them as close as they could ever be with his sex buried deep inside her. He could not think, only feel the great, mounting pleasure of her body responding to his as she met him stroke for stroke. Never had he felt such pleasure, not even with Marilena, whom he had loved so dearly. Years had passed without having this feeling of wholeness.

The tension was coiling inside, and sweat made them slick. Heaviness began to settle low in his abdomen as he drove into her faster and faster while feeling her clench tightly on him. His scrotum tightened as his seed gathered.

Her breath quickened, signaling that her release grew near. Riding on a breathless surge as her hips stiffened beneath him, she cried out his name. Nickoli barely had time to enjoy the sound of his name on her lips as she climaxed before his own came upon him. He felt his seed rush from him and splash against her cervix. He stilled, allowing himself to enjoy the glow of the aftermath before he lowered himself onto the mattress and pulled her into his arms. He ran his fingers through her tousled hair, damp between his fingers. She kissed him under his chin. He lowered his head to take her mouth with his and kiss her thoroughly. Neither of them spoke. Nickoli had no words to express his emotions.

Reluctantly, he pulled his sex from her warmth and rolled from the bed to make his way into the bathroom. After washing himself, he ran the water until it was comfortably warm and returned to Ella. He pulled the covers back and washed his essence from her apex and thighs. He threw the soiled cloths into the hamper and then returned to lie beneath the blankets and take her into his embrace. Exhausted and sexually spent, they fell asleep in each other's arms.

Several times during the chilly night, as they lay snuggled and warm in mutual embrace, one would awaken and begin the tender assault once again. Nickoli didn't want morning to come. Just lying in her arms, having her head resting in quiet repose on his chest as she slept, was like a gift from the Almighty. She was his tonight. It was *his* name that she cried out when he made love to her.

He didn't know what the morrow would bring, and he couldn't allow himself to ponder. For now, his prayers had been answered, and he mentally dog-eared this page in the book of his life as the best memory so far. If he could only believe the encouraging words that Ella's father and brothers spoke to him out in the barn, he would never ask God for another thing—not ever. But Nickoli was a realist. He had been through enough despair and sorrow in his life to know when he was having a streak of good fortune. Without thinking about what the day was about to bring, he settled his arms around Ella and breathed in this moment and prepared to accept whatever would happen next.

Chapter Fourteen

Morning light began to fill the room with its rosy hue. Ella allowed herself to enjoy the silence of the early hour. No one was afoot yet. In her mind, she replayed the night with Nickoli making love to her in every possible way. Alternating between fiery passion and sweet tenderness, Nickoli surprised and delighted her. She never imagined him as such a splendid lover until last night. Nickoli was the man who made her feel safe, made her feel cherished.

She glanced up at the face beside her. The luxurious black hair she had combed her fingers through many times during their lovemaking was now tousled and fell over his left brow. A shadow of dark beard graced the angular planes of his jaw and chin. The coffee brown eyes were closed, but she remembered how they seemed to burn her skin when he traced her body with them.

The large hand now relaxed as it lay across her hip had done such exciting things to her during the night and had touched her in ways no one ever had—not even Mark. As the name of her former fiancé crossed her mind, her joy evaporated and reminded her that Nickoli was not her fiancé. Whatever they had done last night, the truth still remained. They were supposed to be pretending to be in love, but she realized that Nickoli felt more for her than friendship. Part of her wanted it to be true, but the part of her that had been hurt by Mark wished it weren't. She didn't want to fall in love again. The pain of betrayal still gnawed at the edges of her heart. The risk of it happening again made her cringe with fear. Why couldn't things just stay the same between them?

"Is too much thinking, *dragut*." The word, so he had told her, meant "beloved." If he were an actor, he could not have perfected his role as her fiancé any better. He sounded groggy and sexy. His arm that had been resting on her hip moved up to her waist and pulled her closer. Her head was lying on his other arm, but he bent it at the elbow so he could comb his fingers through her hair.

She languished there in his arms wishing she could believe in love again. Mark had certainly convinced her that he loved her. Look what happened with that. Nothing but a lie. Even though her heart kept drawing her closer to Nickoli, she felt that it was like standing on the edge of the event horizon of a black hole. This falling-in-love business was dangerous ground, and she must not allow herself to succumb to its mesmerizing song—not again.

Ella forced herself to move out of his embrace. "We better get up and get dressed. This is Thanksgiving, and there is so much to do. Come on, lazy bones." She sat on the side of the bed for a moment as she slipped into a robe that she picked up off the floor. She did not dare glance back at his dark eyes, or she would roll back into his arms and make a fool of herself one more time.

Hurriedly, she got up, grabbed her clothes from the drawer, and went into the bathroom to shower and dress. She wasn't in the shower ten minutes before Nickoli pulled back the glass door and stepped into the shower with her.

"We save water and time if we take a shower together," he said grinning.

Ella moved away from him. "We have plenty of time, and water, for that matter. Besides, this is the last day. We'll be leaving tomorrow. I think we've done enough practicing in private now. My family seems to believe I'm over Mark now, and they're off my back about it." Her chest felt like she had swallowed a bucket of nails.

He put his hands on her upper arms and turned her so that she would have to face him. Water was running down his face, and the shower had flattened his hair to his head and neck. His dark eyes dug into hers, probing her thoughts. "But last night . . . I thought you had changed your mind. I thought you wanted this to be real. I wanted . . ."

She laughed nervously, cutting him off. "Oh, silly, I know it was just a little fling. We had some fun, and now we're back to normal." She felt vulnerable being wet and naked with him so close. She tried to get out of the shower, but he wouldn't let her go.

His eyes raked over her and pried into her mind. "This is what you really feel? Last night made

no difference to you?”

She shook him off, grabbed a towel, and stepped out of the shower. “You’re my dearest friend, Nick. I don’t want to lose that. While we’re around my family, we’ll put on a good show, but we don’t have to pretend when we’re alone anymore. We don’t need to practice at being in love.” She quickly put on her robe.

Nickoli turned off the water and stepped out behind her. He took a towel from the rack, then tied it around his waist as he followed her into the bedroom. “You mean *you* don’t have to pretend. I was not pretending. Last night was special.” When he caught up with her, he clasped her arm and turned her once again to face him. “You have changed. What is wrong, *comoara mea*?”

“Nothing is wrong, Nick,” she lied. “So we had sex last night.” She tried to pull away from him, but he held her. “I know how it is with men. You get a little sex and then move on.” She laughed hollowly. “It’s okay. I get that now. You don’t have to act like it meant something.”

Nickoli pulled her to him and took her up in his arms. “It was not like that. It meant something to *me*.”

Pushing him away, she moved back a couple steps. She would not meet his gaze. “Once Mark had sex with me, it was over. He said the same things you’re saying now, but it was all lies.” Tears were burning at the backs of her eyes. “I don’t want to be in love. It just hurts too much.”

Nickoli sat heavily on the edge of the bed and let his arms rest on his thighs. He took a deep breath as if to fortify himself. “I am not Mark, Ella.” His voice sounded tired.

“I’ve got to go, Nick. The family is starting to get up now, and there’s a lot to do.” She pulled on her jeans and sweater, stepped into her sneakers, and headed toward the door. “I’ll see you downstairs.”

As soon as she closed the door between them, she felt an irresistible urge to run back into the room and leap into his arms, but she fought it. Sooner or later, this was all going to end anyway. It was best to start backing away from it now.

* * * *

By the time Nickoli came down, the entire family was up and breakfast was on the table. Even though they sat side by side at the table, Nickoli made no attempt to take her hand under the table or to kiss her the way he had done before. Ella felt the family watching them, and she knew they were wondering what had changed between her and Nickoli.

She could barely eat the muffin on her plate or drink her coffee. Stealing glances at Nickoli, she saw that he, like she, had lost his appetite. On the surface, he seemed to be attentive to what others were saying and made occasional comments, but Ella knew him well enough to know that he was upset. A feeling of guilt that she had been the cause of his change in temperament dug into her chest.

Even though it had all been an act, she had loved it—loved *him*. This whole thing had been a very bad idea. It was made worse by the fact that she had not really been acting. All the while he had been showing such fondness for her, she had been secretly loving it and basking in the glow of false affection.

The things he said this morning about not pretending to care for her, well, maybe he felt he had to say them. He was from another culture, and perhaps Romanians felt obligated to declare love for the women they had sex with. He had said that he had loved her. Well, Mark had said that, too. If Nickoli truly loved her, why had he not said anything before now? It had been two years since she and Mark had split up. Why wait until now to tell her these feelings? She folded her hands in her lap and stared down at them.

Even if Nickoli had told her that he loved her months ago, she would have rejected him just as

she was doing now. There was no way she could allow herself to trust in another man. They all seemed sincere in the beginning, but she knew what the outcome would be. There was not enough strength in her to take another risk.

She made up her mind. They would go to the dance tonight and act as though they were in love so that the whole town would know that Ella Dubois had a new fiancé. She hoped the news would get back to Mark, and she hoped that he would regret what he had done to her two years ago. After that, she and Nickoli would go back home and carry on as they had before.

Having renewed her resolve to avoid love at all costs, Ella stole a glance at Nickoli. He was smiling at something Angeline had said. As she looked around the table, she saw that everyone was making hooded glances at her and Nickoli. Even though the conversation seemed to flow and all seemed normal, she felt the tense undercurrent of their inquisitive observations. They would never be so intrusive as to ask what had happened between last night and this morning, but she knew that the minute her mother had a moment alone with her, there would be questions.

Her father rose from the table and announced, "I have to take care of the livestock in the barn." He glanced around the table. "Rudy? Nick? Would you care to join me?" His announcement was followed by the sounds of chair legs scraping against the floor as the two other men got up to join him. Nickoli leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips in an attempt to continue playing his role, but he said nothing.

As they were exiting the dining room, Leo bumped into them. "Sorry I'm late. Getting kids dressed and ready in the morning can be a hassle." As if sensing something was wrong, he glanced at their father, and some kind of silent communication transpired.

"Could you help me in the barn, son? It won't take long. Breakfast will still be waiting for you." Her father waved his arm as if to herd the men out quickly.

Leo handed off his youngest child to his wife. "See if you can get the baby to take his bottle and get Lily to eat something more nourishing than cookies, Jane." He kissed her lightly. "I'll be back in just a few minutes."

Then he whispered something to Jane that Ella couldn't hear. Jane's eyes darted to Ella, then back to Leo. A second later, the men were out the door. Jane settled in the chair that Nickoli had previously occupied.

"Here," Ella said, "I'll take the baby. You go ahead and get something to eat." She took baby David, Leo and Jane's six-month-old, into her lap and gave him the warmed bottle of formula that Jane handed her.

"Thanks, Ella. I love these kids, but sometimes they can be a pain in the butt." From across the table, Lily giggled at the word *butt*. Jane winked at Ella. "You'll see what I mean soon enough."

A vision ran across Ella's mind of her and Nick herding several beautiful, dark-headed children to the breakfast table, and a feeling of pure joy blazed a trail across her heart. It took her breath for a moment, but then she suppressed the vision and made herself numb to the pleasant feelings her vision conjured.

* * * *

The men were in the barn more than a few minutes. Finally, the Dubois women cleared the table after preparing a plate for Leo and placing it in the warming oven for him upon his return.

By the time the men reentered the kitchen, the turkey was stuffed and in the oven. Without looking up, Ella knew that Nickoli had entered the room, and she could not force her heart to slow its quickened pace. She sensed him draw near, and, when he placed his big hand on the small of her back, a warm glow spread through her.

He leaned his head close to her ear, so close that his breath moved a strand of her hair that

tickled her cheek. "I'm sorry, Ella." She melted into his arms as he dragged her to his chest. Laying his cheek on the crown of her head, he whispered, "Everything will be all right. Not to worry now."

"I'm sorry, too." She meant it. For that moment, she allowed him to hold her close. A unified sigh seemed to run across the room as if everyone had been holding their breath. The smell of pumpkin pie baking in the oven reminded her that they were standing in the kitchen with her family looking on.

Nickoli released her slowly. He smiled, this time genuinely. "I understand, is tradition, we go to the parade now. Yes?"

Ella glanced up at the clock on the wall. "Oh my gosh. We better hurry. It'll start in half an hour."

Everyone became animated, getting coats on the children, pulling out the pies, and checking on the turkey. Leo sat at the counter on a stool and ate the food they had saved for him.

When all was said and done, it took three vehicles to accommodate all of them. They drove the short distance into town and parked the cars in the empty parking lot behind Radcliff's Flower Shop. Excitement permeated the crisp, cold air as they walked a block and a half to Market Street, which ran the length of the town. People in heavy coats and scarves lined the street cheering and talking enthusiastically as the parade marched by.

Nickoli and Ella stood close to absorb each other's heat. The family gathered around them, and Angeline, looping her arm through Nickoli's, snuggled close to his side. Ella suppressed a giggle at her sister's obvious infatuation with Nickoli. She was happy that he respected her sister's young feelings, even though she noticed that he never encouraged them.

Her nieces and nephews stood huddled next to their parents or sat on their shoulders. Only her mother was missing, having stayed behind to take care of the baby and watch the turkey.

. Ella felt a nostalgic ache in her chest as she glanced around at her family gathered there with her and Nickoli in their center watching the traditional Thanksgiving parade. As the high school band blared out a tune and the majorettes twirled their batons in an impressive and flamboyant manner, Ella took in every sight, sound, and smell. She wanted to memorize everything, including the feel of Nickoli's warmth as he drew her close to his side, and keep the memory of it in her heart always.

Chapter Fifteen

Thanksgiving dinner was huge, delicious, and noisy but entirely wonderful in Nickoli's mind. He liked the part where, after Jim said the prayer, they went around the table and each person, including the children, said what they were grateful for. When it was his turn, Nickoli was glad to express his gratitude for being in a country where he could enjoy freedom even though he missed Romania. He told how grateful he was to have had a wife and child, even though he lost them both so soon, and that he would always appreciate his father's courage in escaping their homeland to seek a better life in a place so far from all that he knew.

"But what I am most grateful for is Ella. She is my light and my joy."

Nickoli turned to Ella and smiled, hoping that she knew how much he meant what he said. He took her hand and kissed her knuckles lightly. *"Inima mea, te iubesc."* It meant "my heart, I love you." He was glad, for once, that she did not understand Romanian because he knew, after their quarrel earlier, that she would reject his words as lies.

If only there was a way to make her see how much he cared. Fortunately, the talk in the barn this morning with Jim, Rudy, and Leo had helped him get through the day. Jim's advice stuck in his memory very clearly. *"Don't use words, Nick. She'll reject everything you say. Just show her how you feel and be patient."*

After he got his pep talk from Ella's brothers and father and received their advice, he had returned to the Dubois kitchen and Ella with renewed confidence. When he held her, she leaned into him, responding to him the way he hoped she would. Maybe he still had a chance.

Perhaps tonight at the dance he could give her the gift he bought for her and show her how much he cared. Eventually she would have to hear his words and understand how deeply he loved her. He prayed she would let go of past hurts and believe him.

With the feast of Thanksgiving finished, everyone worked together to clear off the table, wash the dishes, and then they separated the leftovers to share among them. There was still enough food left to have turkey sandwiches for a couple days. After all the work was done and the household had had a chance to relax, it was time to get ready for the Thanksgiving dance.

Knowing that Mark was probably going to attend worried Nickoli. Would Ella be hurt when the man who rejected her showed up with his wife? Nickoli had wanted to warn her so that she could be emotionally prepared or, if she wasn't up to it, simply not go to the dance. Jim and Ella's brothers advised him to stay out of it.

"It's up to Ella how she wants to handle it and not for us to judge how she does it," Jim had advised. "If it all goes south and he hurts her again, just be there for her."

Nickoli wasn't entirely comfortable with Jim's advice, but the man was her father and loved her dearly. As much as Nickoli wanted to protect Ella from any hurt, he trusted those who loved her, and embraced their counsel.

Alone in their room upstairs, Ella and Nickoli dressed for the formal dance. Nickoli stood before the mirror attempting for the fourth time to tie the black bow tie. Ella slipped up behind him and dipped under his arm. She reached up to tie his bow tie for him, sweeping his hands away with a gentle nudge.

Until that moment, Nickoli had been so intent on getting himself dressed that he had not noticed Ella or what she was wearing. But now that he was peering down at her, he felt his breath hitch at the sight of her in her deep purple satin gown that draped over her curves in the most enticing way. A golden leaf-shaped brooch with a cluster of pearls at its base held the matching purple wrap with contrasting lime green lining in place. Her hair was smooth and swept up in a French twist at the back of her head and held in place by a tortoiseshell clip. A single pearl adorned each of her earlobes.

"You are so beautiful," Nickoli said and wished he could think of something more imaginative to say, but his mind was unable to formulate words to express how exquisite her appearance was. Her fingers brushed his throat and accelerated his heartbeat. He felt suddenly sluggish and clumsy.

"Thank you," she said softly. The smile she gave him made his heart falter. Leaning down toward her smile, he kissed her lightly on the lips and yearned to kiss her with the passion he truly felt but did not want to scare or pressure her. It was important to be gentle and undemanding right now.

When she finished tying his bow tie, she stepped back to admire her work. "You are so handsome, Nickoli." She pulled on the long, lime green gloves that went up to her elbows and clasped her hands before her as she peered up at him. Her eyes were bright and held excitement in them. "Even though I've seen you in a tuxedo a few times, I don't think I ever noticed how handsome you look in it before now."

Nickoli chuckled. "You are just being polite to give me a compliment." Suddenly he remembered the corsage he had bought for her. He had taken the box out of the refrigerator before they came upstairs to dress. Moving toward the table where he had put the box, he said, "I have something for you."

Removing the delicate corsage made of white roses and asparagus fern attached to a white, satin wristband with a bow, he presented it to her.

"How thoughtful of you, Nick. I had forgotten about things like corsages." She held out her arm to allow him to place it on her wrist.

After placing the corsage, Nickoli took the liberty of holding her hand for just a moment. "I confess," he said grinning, "your father took us to the flower shop yesterday and told us to buy our ladies a corsage."

"Dad is such a gentleman." She grinned back at Nickoli. "He knows all those old sentimental ways to win a woman's heart."

"I certainly hope so." The words slipped out before he could stop them.

* * * *

Everyone met in the living room. They decided to go in separate cars so that the ladies would not have to muss their gowns by getting into the backseat.

The dance was at the Independence Country Club. To Nickoli, the place looked like a mansion, with every window brightly lit, sitting in the sparkling snow. He felt a little nervous, wondering if anyone would notice his foreign accent and concerned that he might make a social faux pas and embarrass himself and the family that he was beginning to care for so much.

After the valet drove his SUV off to the parking lot, Nickoli led Ella into the impressive entrance that spanned two stories by placing his hand at the small of her back. The double doors opened as they were greeted by two doormen. Nickoli checked his coat at the coat check and proceeded into the grand ballroom. He was impressed with the décor. Every detail was well thought out, from the polished marble floors to the blue velvet draperies at the ceiling-to-floor windows lining both opposing walls. Chairs and couches upholstered in blue and yellow brocade and velvet were clustered in conversational gatherings along the walls. A table of refreshments decorated in the season's motif of pumpkins, sheaves of corn, gourds, ceramic turkeys, and thick pillar candles sat at one end of the room. A well-stocked bar with attentive bartenders dominated the other end of the room.

The orchestra sat on a platform situated in front of two large windows along the outer wall. Across the room were several sets of French doors that led out onto a stone patio that Nickoli assumed overlooked a garden. Interspersed throughout the room were tables draped in crisp white

linen and decorated with candles and flowers. It was a beautiful sight, and Nickoli was impressed with the care taken to create such a delightful and festive room.

The orchestra was playing a waltz, and several couples were already on the dance floor swirling like colorful leaves to the music. Nickoli saw that Rudy had already found a vacant table, and the family members were beginning to arrange themselves around it. He led Ella over to the table, pulled out a chair for her to be seated, and asked what she would like to drink. He walked to the bar and ordered champagne, and a ginger ale for himself. Since he was driving, he wanted to keep a clear head.

When he got to the bar and ordered the drinks, a man sitting there nursing a whiskey greeted him. "I saw you come in with Ella. Are you the man she's engaged to?"

Nickoli extended his hand. "Nickoli Vesa. Friends call me Nick. Pleased to meet you . . ."

"Mark. Mark McKinnett." He shook hands with Nickoli, half rising from his seat. "I'm her used-to-be."

"Ah, yes, Mark. Congratulations on your marriage and the birth of your child." Nickoli could not help analyzing the man who had once captured Ella's heart. He seemed well dressed and was, as far as he knew, an attractive man with brown hair and blue eyes. He was shorter than Nickoli but well muscled, as if he worked out on a regular basis.

"That was last year. We have another one on the way now, due in April. The wife is in the bathroom yakking up right now." He chuckled as he glanced over at Ella sitting at the table with the family.

Nickoli knew that Ella had not seen Mark yet, and he tensed against the moment she realized that Mark was there. As if by thinking it he made it happen, Ella turned her head to glance at Nickoli, and then her eyes fell on Mark. He read the shock in her eyes before she quickly turned her attention away from Mark.

"Is good to meet you, Mark. I must go now and join the family," Nickoli said to excuse himself.

Mark stretched out his arm and grabbed Nickoli's sleeve, causing Nickoli to spill some of the drinks. "Hey, where are you from? You have an accent I don't recognize."

"I am from Romania. My father and I came to America years ago." He hurried away before Mark could ask him anything else. Concern for Ella made him walk quickly back to their table.

Ella met him with a look of desperation in her eyes. Her hand shook as she took her drink. A niggles of anger ran through him that the man he had just met could have hurt his beloved Ella to such a degree that two years later she was still shaken by his presence. He wondered if she still loved him. The very thought of her loving someone else made his chest hurt as if someone had thrust a dagger into his heart.

Taking a seat beside Ella, Nickoli clasped her hand in his. He could not resist leaning forward and kissing her lightly on the lips. The orchestra began to play a slow tune. "Come, Ella, let us dance," Nickoli said.

She nodded and stood but seemed incapable of taking a step forward. Nickoli wrapped an arm around her and helped her out onto the dance floor. She stepped into his arms and seemed to loosen up when she glanced up at him.

"I'm sorry. It just took me by surprise that Mark is here. I didn't expect him." She stared at Nickoli's throat. "Do you know if he brought Sandra with him?"

"Of course, she is his wife." Nickoli said it to bring Ella gently into the reality of the situation. "It would be expected that she come, yes?" He paused, then added, "Just as it would be expected that you would come with me, your fiancé. Don't forget that we are playing a part so that he will know that you no longer care for him." All the while, he looked into the pain in her eyes and wanted to cross the room to where Mark sat and knock him into the floor.

"Yes. Yes. That's right. He'll think I've moved on and found a new and better love." Her voice

was soft and edged with nervousness when she spoke.

"Oh, I see. A better love. Is that right, *comoara mea*?" He said it to make light of the situation.

They danced the rest of the dance in silence. When the music changed to another tune, they returned to the table. Ella seemed less distraught, but Nickoli was tense, like a wolf wary and alert, ready to protect and defend his territory—his woman.

From the corner of his eye, Nickoli saw Mark's wife return to the bar and take a seat beside him. Her eyes seemed dull, her shoulders drooped, and Nickoli sensed that her life was not a happy one.

The Dubois men took turns dancing with their wives. One of them stayed at the table with Ella and Nickoli as if to watch over them. Nickoli was warmed by their attempts to help Ella. Then the inevitable happened—Mark and Sandra made their way to the table where Nickoli and Ella sat.

Mark greeted them. "Jim, Charlene. How are you this evening? I'm sure there was the usual grand feast at your house today."

"Good evening, Mark. Sandra," Jim said, rather cool but cordial.

"Ella, it's so good to see you back in town for the holidays. You look good. Did you lose weight or have a makeover or something?" He chuckled as if what he said was funny.

"I'm fine, thank you. It's just the same ol' me, Mark. Hello, Sandra." She paused, then introduced Nickoli. "I believe you have already met Nickoli earlier this evening, Mark. Nickoli, this is Sandra McKinnett, Mark's wife. Sandra, this is Nickoli Vesa, my fiancé."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Vesa." Her voice was passive and lacked vitality. It almost hurt to peer into her eyes.

"Please, call me Nick." He sensed her misery. It was almost palpable. Wanting to relieve it, he asked about her child. "I understand you have a child. Is it a boy or a girl?"

Her face flushed slightly. "A boy. His name is Charles. We're expecting another baby in April. I hope we'll have a girl this time."

"I hope we have another boy," Mark said. His eyes fastened on Ella, and Nickoli wanted to wipe the wolfish look off his face with his fist.

"Congratulations, Sandra," Ella said. "I hope, whatever the baby's sex, that it will be a healthy baby."

"Thank you, Ella. I'm glad you aren't holding . . . you know . . . a grudge. We never meant—"

"Let it alone, Sandra." Mark interrupted her. His voice seemed laced with irritation. "Hey, look, Ella, why don't you come and dance with me? You know, for old times' sake. You don't mind, do you, Nick?"

Like hell, I don't mind. "If Ella cares to dance with you, I cannot object." Nickoli hoped his words didn't sound like he was speaking through clenched teeth. He turned to Sandra. "Would you like to dance?" He asked her because he felt sorry for her. It must be hell living with a lout like Mark. Ella should consider herself lucky to have escaped him, but, of course, she didn't.

"Thank you, Nick. Yes, it would be lovely to dance with you."

Nickoli decided to stay close to Ella just in case she needed him. He didn't mean to eavesdrop on their conversation, but Mark's voice carried. He wondered how Sandra could remain calm with some of the things her husband was saying to Ella.

"You really do look great, Ella. Did you do something different?" Mark said as soon as they arrived on the dance floor.

"No, Mark. Like I said before, it's just the same old me." Her expression looked like she had a bad taste in her mouth. "So you and Sandra are going to have a second child. I'm happy for you. Wasn't Sandra two years our junior?"

"Yeah, Sandra Lawson. Surely you remember her."

"Yes, I do remember her, Mark. How could I forget? I remember when I found the two of you romping in bed on the day we were supposed to get married. I'll probably never forget it."

Nickoli couldn't bear to look down at Sandra and see what the expression was on her face. He heard her whisper into his chest. "I regret that I did that. I'm paying for it now."

Nickoli didn't know quite what to say, so he remained silent.

"Come on now, Ella, let bygones be bygones. You know she's pregnant again. I guess we'll be having another screaming brat in a few months."

Nickoli wondered if Mark was always like this. How could Ella ever care for such a cad?

"You should be happy, Mark. You got the woman you wanted, and now you have another baby on the way—a family of your very own." She glanced at Nickoli, and he couldn't help but see the desperation in her eyes. He wasn't sure if he should intervene or let her handle her own battles.

"What I really want is you. I regret we didn't get married. We understood each other. And we had so many things in common. Sandra and I barely have anything to talk about anymore except dirty diapers and bills." He pulled her closer to his chest.

Sandra gasped and stumbled when she overheard their conversation.

"I hate to think we had anything in common," Ella replied and pushed away from him.

Mark pulled her back and tried to kiss her, but she turned her head away from him. "Come on, baby, we could go out to my new Mustang and get reacquainted."

That was it. That was all he was going to allow. Nickoli took Sandra from the dance floor, helped her to a chair, and walked over with long strides to where Mark and Ella were dancing. Without a single word, he reached out and snatched Mark from Ella as the other man made another attempt to kiss her. With one well-placed blow, he knocked Mark to the ground.

Mark sat there holding his bleeding nose and looked up at Nickoli with dark anger in his eyes. "You foreign bastard, I think you broke my nose. I ought to sue you for everything you're worth."

Nickoli stood over him and hoped that Mark would get up so he could knock him down again. "You will not hurt Ella again. You never deserved her. You care nothing for your own wife, who overheard everything you said." He glanced across the room at Mark's wife. She was slumped over with her face in her hands. She was probably crying.

Ella stepped in between Nickoli and Mark. Her eyes were filled with anger as she peered up at Nickoli. "Stop it, Nick. Stop it right now. Why couldn't you just let me handle it myself?"

"He didn't mean anything by it," Sandra said meekly as she made her way back to the dance floor along with Ella's family. A host of other people had also gathered. "He's always kidding around like that." Her voice cracked just a little, giving away her hurt feelings beneath the bravado. Sandra walked over to Mark and leaned over him to soothe his brow with the back of her hand. Someone gave him a cold compress, and she held it to the bridge of his nose.

"Back off, Sandra. I'm fine." Mark gave her a disgruntled look and sat cross-legged on the floor.

"Nick was defending you. Can't you see that, sis?" Leo stood beside Nickoli, who was grateful someone was coming to his defense.

What was wrong with her? Why was she angry with him instead of the fool sitting on the floor? Nickoli pleaded, "I was only trying to—"

"I know what you were trying to do. You're humiliating me." She turned her back to Nickoli and extended her hand as if to help Mark up. He grinned at her like a fox about to enter the henhouse.

How could she be nice to the guy who had made a pass at her with his wife within earshot? Nickoli felt his blood heat with resentment to the boiling point. "I was trying to help you."

"I don't need your help, Nick. Now just back off, and let me handle this my way."

Her words hurt him like arrows piercing his heart. "Maybe I should leave." He prayed she wouldn't let him do that.

"Maybe you should. This evening is ruined for me anyway. Just go home. I'll get a ride with Mom and Dad. Just go." Her eyes were hot with anger—anger aimed at him, not at Mark.

What else could he do but leave? He had had enough. If Ella wanted Mark in spite of all he'd

done to her, then what could he do to stop her? It seemed she had made up her mind who she wanted, and it wasn't him. Before he embarrassed himself again, Nickoli turned on his heel and left.

Chapter Fifteen

An hour later, after Mark had them call an ambulance to take him to the emergency room, Ella made her way into her parents' car and sat in the backseat with her beautiful gown splattered with blood and crushed into wrinkles around her ankles. She was grateful that Mark changed his mind about pressing charges against Nickoli after her father convinced him it would only add to the embarrassment that was already being experienced by everyone involved.

After Ella explained everything to her parents and brothers, she wanted to sink into the floor, never to be heard from again. Sitting in dejected silence, she wished that she had not said the things she did to Nickoli. She knew she must have hurt him. She had never seen him so angry. It was a side of him that he had kept hidden until now.

"I was proud of Nick tonight," her father said, breaking the heavy silence. "He stood up for you and defended you against that two-timing excuse for a man."

"He embarrassed me in front of everyone there." Ella's pride kept her from admitting that she had been harsh in her criticism of Nickoli's actions.

"He loves you, dear. That's what men do when someone they love is being threatened." Her mother reached over and patted her father's thigh. Her parents exchanged knowing smiles.

Maybe it was time she got honest with her parents. Her deceit was eating at her conscience. She had never lied to them or kept such a secret before. "Well, Mom, the truth is Nick isn't in love with me. We're not engaged. He's not even my boyfriend. Nick is my friend and allowed me to make you all believe that I had moved on, that I had found a new love and was happy." There. She had said the awful truth.

"You're wrong about Nick, honey. He does love you." He grinned at her mother. "We knew something wasn't quite right, didn't we, Charlee?" He used the affectionate nickname he often used when he addressed Ella's mother.

Her mother nodded in agreement. "We've known and loved you since the moment you came into this world, so we guessed that something about you and Nick wasn't what it seemed. It was obvious that he loves you though, darling."

"How could you know that? I certainly don't know it." How could they know such a thing? Nick had never told her that he was in love with her—not until they started pretending to be in love anyway. But he did make love to her—and it had certainly been his idea to carry their fantasy love affair into their private time. Heat ran up and down her body just thinking about the ways that he had made love to her.

She had thought that Nick was just taking an opportunity when it arose like any other man would do. It suddenly occurred to her that taking advantage of such a situation was really not Nickoli's style. But loving her the way her parents believed just could not be true. Could it?

She knew that Nickoli was gone the moment they pulled up to the house. His SUV was nowhere to be seen. She leaped from the car the moment it came to a stop and, disregarding the damage to her gown, ran through the snow and slush, into the house, and up the stairs.

After going through the closet and drawers and finding that all of Nickoli's things were gone, she slumped on the bed and let the tears flow. That's when she noticed the little box wrapped in pale green paper and tied with a pink satin bow. Beside it on the table was a note. She knew from the generous handwriting that it was from Nickoli.

With shaking hands, she carefully removed the paper and the bow, then opened the box. Inside was a shiny gold bracelet with a single charm—a baby grand piano. She placed it on her wrist, where the corsage still stayed clasped, and gazed at it through watery eyes. Then she picked up the note and read it.

My darling, Ella. I bought this bracelet and charm for you to remind you of the piano you loved and could not rescue. I love you the way you love the piano. But now there are just bitter notes between us. I am so sorry. All my love, Nick.

She had been such a fool not to have seen it. All she could ever think about was the day her heart was broken. It was all her fault that her life had not become happy. Looking back, she wondered what had ever made her think that she was in love with Mark. What, oh what was she going to do now?

* * * *

It snowed again on Christmas Eve. Ella had not seen or heard from Nickoli since the Thanksgiving dance. She missed him terribly but was afraid he would never be able to forgive her. What could she say that could possibly win him back?

She made one last visit to the piano. It had all rotted into pieces and was piled up on the curb in a sad heap. So this is what bitterness and resentment could do. It destroyed things that were beautiful and stilled the music of the heart.

On a crazy impulse, she got out of the car and braved the cold and snow to go to the old man's door and knock. She had no idea what she wanted to say, but she felt she ought to say something about what he had destroyed. She waited and waited, but there was no answer.

She stood on her tiptoes and peered through the window in the door. All that was in the empty room were boxes, as if someone had packed in a hurry and then left suddenly. A neighbor stepped out on the porch of the house next door. The middle-aged woman hugged her sweater-clad arms against the growing cold and called to Ella, "Are you a relative?"

"No. No, I just remember him from when the piano was in his yard. Did he move away?"

The woman seemed to hesitate before she spoke. "No, ma'am, he didn't move away. He died."

Ella was shocked at the news. "What happened? Did he have a heart attack?"

The woman shook her head. Her eyes were downcast. She looked back up at Ella and spoke in sorrowful tones. "He was never the same after his wife left him. His children stopped coming after a time. He was bitter and blamed his wife for all his unhappiness—took it out on her piano. Just let it go to ruin out here in the yard. Then one night about a week ago, he hung himself in the closet."

Ella's hands went to her throat. She could hardly breathe just thinking about the old man and what had become of him. "You mean he committed suicide?" It was really more a statement than a question.

"Yes, miss. He killed himself. His son found him Sunday before last. He had come to talk his father into going to church with him, get him out of that house and all."

Ella's stomach burned, and her heart went out to the son who found his father dead in such a sad circumstance. She stepped off the porch and started walking back to her car. "Thank you for telling me what happened to him."

"You're welcome. It's too cold to stand out here anymore, but I want to wish you a merry Christmas, and sorry about your friend. Be careful driving on the icy streets. Sun's about to set, and it's hard to see where the ice is in the dark."

"Thank you. I'll be careful. Merry Christmas to you, too." She didn't correct the woman for referring to her as the man's friend.

Ella's resolve fortified itself as she stared at the pitiful fate of the baby grand piano and thought about what sorrow had led the old man to do. More than ever, she knew she had to make amends to Nickoli. Her need to see him was overwhelming. No matter what he said or did, even if he kicked

her out into the snow, she had to see him and tell him how she really felt. It amazed her even now when she realized she had been in love with Nickoli for a very long time. He was everything she could ever want in a man. She had been such a fool, and she had treated him so wrongfully.

Leaving the remains of the piano behind, Ella headed toward Nickoli's house. As she pulled into the driveway, she noticed through the front window that he had a Christmas tree up and decorated. Her knees shook so badly when she got out of the car that she wasn't sure for a moment if she could stand. Fear and nervousness ran rampant throughout her body. *Oh, please let him be glad to see me and listen to what I have to say.*

With shaking hands, she rang the doorbell and waited for the door to open. After just a few moments that felt like hours, the front door opened, spilling warmth and light out onto the porch. Nickoli's imposing form stood before her.

"Ella?"

It took a moment before she could force her closed throat to open and allow her to speak. Fighting back tears and regret, she finally was able to form words. "Nick, I'm so sorry. I've treated you so despicably. I wanted to tell you how sorry I am for the way I acted and thank you for trying to take up for me when Mark acted like such a jerk. You were so kind trying to support me even though I was wrong. Oh God, I've been such a fool. And thank you for your beautiful present."

"Please to come in, Ella. You will freeze out here." He stood at the door waving her in, then shut the door and took her coat and hat to hang in the hall closet. He led her into the kitchen, where a cup of coffee sat on the table by a newspaper that was strewn over the surface. "Let me get you some hot coffee. I just made it."

Before she had time to answer him, he had the cup poured with cream and sugar just the way she liked it. A lump formed in her throat, threatening to make her lose her nerve as she realized how well he knew her, how very kind he was.

He pulled out a chair for her. "Come. Join me."

She stood beside the chair unable to sit until she told him everything. "Nick, I have to tell you how I truly feel. All the while we were pretending to be in love, I wasn't pretending." She wrung her hands. "I was too scared. That someone could love me and really mean it was a fantasy to me." She took a steadying breath. "But all this time that we've been friends, I have loved you. I mean the in-love kind of love."

She dared to glance up at him and saw his dark eyes, patient and kind, smiling at her. "I have been in love with you for a long time, but I wasn't ready to let go of all the pain and the way that I had been hurt."

His warm, strong arms gathered her in, but he remained silent.

"When I read your note that you left with the bracelet, I wanted to see you, talk to you, and tell you how I truly felt even if you couldn't forgive me. But I'm such a coward. I couldn't bring myself to face you. It wasn't until I went by to see what had happened with the piano and learned that the old man who left it out there had committed suicide that I knew I had to see you. I don't want to be like that old man, alone and bitter. So, with my last ounce of courage, I drove here to see you and hope with all my heart that you can forgive me." Then she did cry, sobbed into his sweatshirt.

Nickoli sat down in the chair he had pulled out for her and pulled her into his lap. He rocked her and smoothed her hair for a few minutes before he spoke. "When I bought the bracelet for you, I bought you something else."

"You bought me a Christmas present? I didn't buy you anything." He handed her a handkerchief, and she blew her nose.

"No, not a Christmas present. Not actually a present." He stood and allowed her to sit in the chair. "Here. Drink your coffee, and I'll go get it."

Nickoli left the room and returned in a few moments with a small object in his hand. He knelt in

front of Ella and opened the box that contained a beautiful diamond ring. Ella gasped, excitement zigzagging through her.

"I knew when we were visiting your family that what we were pretending was what I had wanted for so long. I want to make it real. I want to love you for the rest of my life. So, Ella Frances Dubois, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Oh my God, do you mean it?" Her hand was shaking as he took it and placed the ring on her finger.

Nickoli smiled. "Of course I mean it, *comoara mea*. I love you with all my heart."

"Oh yes, Nick, I want to marry you. I love you so much." She stood and wrapped her arms around his neck as he dipped his head to kiss her with heat and passion so great it made her knees grow weak.

He scooped her up in her arms and headed for the stairs. "Shall we celebrate in the warmth of my bed?"

"Absolutely," she answered and kissed him everywhere as he carried her up the stairs and into their future.

The End

About the Author

Writing has been Sarah's passion since she was a kid. In particular, she loves to write paranormal, time travel, and fantasy but, every once in a while, she has the urge to write contemporary romance straight up, hold the lemon, hold the ice kind of stories about couples in modern circumstances and conflicts.

She retired early from nursing in the emergency room to pursue her writing career full time, and she is so glad she did. It is so wonderful to be able to dedicate all her time to her writing. She also is a reviewer for a well-known review company and enjoys reading fresh work from new authors as well as literary standards.

Although originally from a small college town in Pennsylvania, she has lived most of her life in the south. She is an animal and environmental activist with membership in the ASPCA, Defenders of Wildlife, the Humane Society of the United States, and the Golden Retriever Rescue Club. Just for fun, she plays several musical instruments including the violin, bagpipes, guitar, and harmonica.

She lives in North Carolina with her rescued pets, Lily, the Golden Retriever and two cats, Liberty and Acorn.

Visit Sarah on the Web at www.sarahmcneal.com.